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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

A MERCURY PUBLICATION

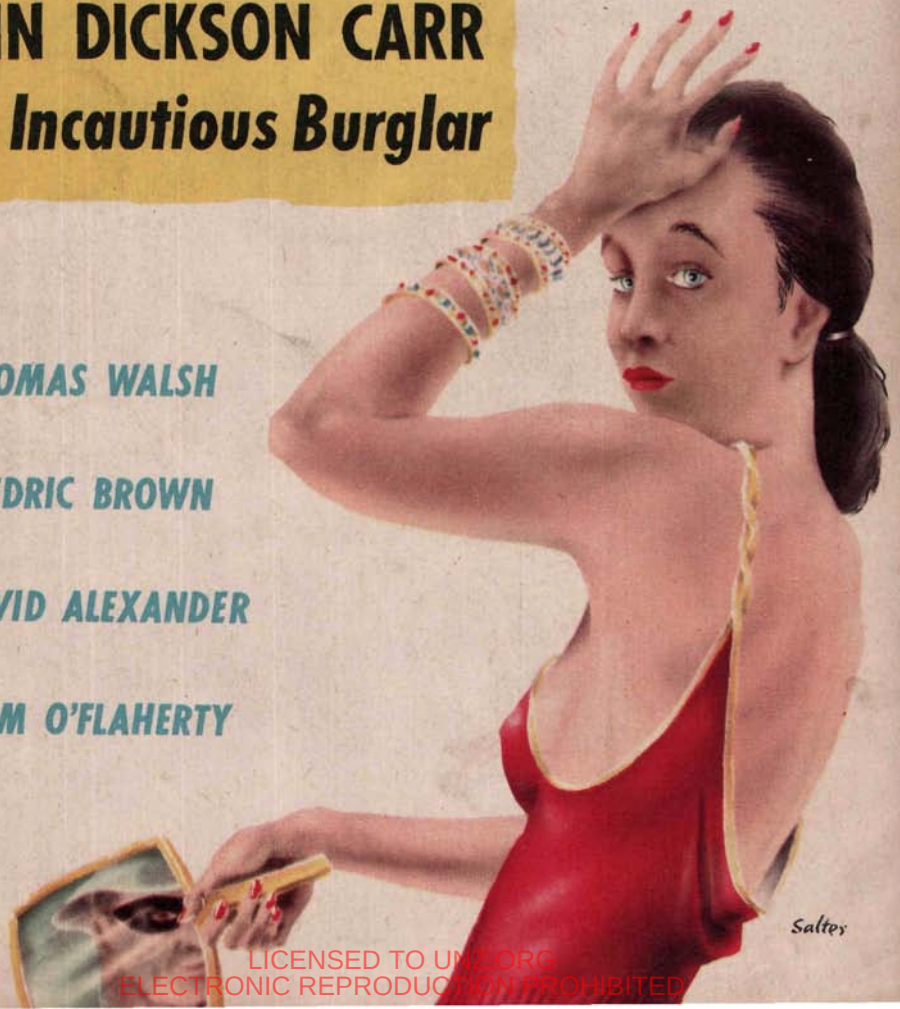
JOHN DICKSON CARR
The Incautious Burglar

THOMAS WALSH

FREDRIC BROWN

DAVID ALEXANDER

LIAM O'FLAHERTY



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including **BLACK MASK MAGAZINE**

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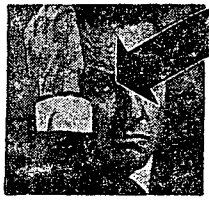

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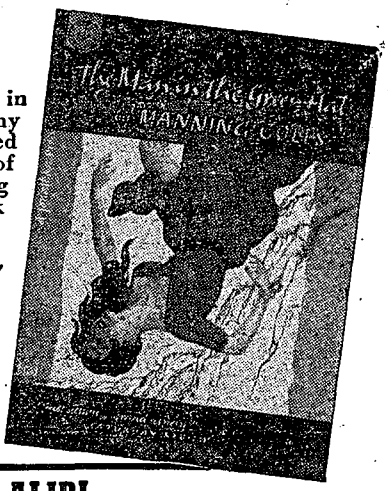

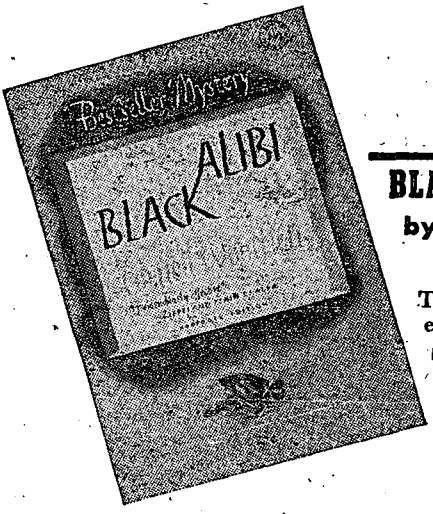

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **THOMAS WALSH**

TITLE: ***Women — Pests or Poison***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVES: Mac and the Rube

LOCALES: Miami and New York and en route

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *It was a case of hot money — $60,000 of it, stolen from a bank in the Bronx; but it was also a case of a pert little doll who was smart — plenty smart. She knew all the answers.*

HIS STATEROOM DOOR GAVE ME THE whole story. It wasn't locked, and as soon as I tried it I knew I wasn't going to find what I wanted inside. There were a couple of bags by the bed and a wardrobe trunk and some clothes lying around, and after I closed the door and switched on the lights I took the smallest bag first. It wasn't there, of course, nor in the bigger bag, nor in the trunk — unlocked too. Hiding a thing in the most obvious place — in his own luggage, in an unlocked cabin — might be the smart thing to do in books, but I guess this Martin Francis would have told you that the most obvious place would be about the only place that a cop would ever think of looking.

Still, I went over his cabin pretty thoroughly. I had an hour to do it in while he was eating in the dining room, and there was no need to worry about his coming back unexpectedly because Rube Malone was watching him there all the time, ready to duck out and give me the nod whenever he seemed ready to leave. But I didn't need the hour; in twenty minutes I'd gone through everything he had. No dice. Sixty thousand dollars in fifties and hundreds take up a fair-sized space; you couldn't just tuck it under a cushion — though I looked there — or inside a hat, though I looked in the three he had with him, just to be sure. When that was done I was a little sore but not too disappointed, because I

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had never let myself get too hopeful. Even Rube Malone had said this idea of mine was a long shot all the way.

It took me a little time putting his things back just the way I'd found them, and I did that only because there was no hurry at all. I wouldn't have put up a dime to a dollar that Martin Francis would never notice someone had been at his luggage. Leaving his cabin door open, his trunk unlocked, had been practically an invitation to come on in and get it over with. This Martin Francis wouldn't trust his own brother, and I suppose he'd smelled a rat long ago on one of the boys that had knocked over this bank in the Bronx.

He was smart and tough and always careful, but a little too much of a chiseler at heart. If he'd given the bank robbers a break the Rube and I might have been back in New York then, still groping around for a lead. After the job they had been able to dispose of the small bills all right, but the fifties and hundreds had been another matter. The first time one of them tried to pass a hundred in Grand Central Station intuition or something just did get him away from the ticket window before a cop, two railroad police, and a detective in plain clothes showed up there.

That commotion must have made the rest of the boys careful; anyway, they began to shop around for the best deal they could make. Sixty thousand dollars' worth of fifties and hundreds, especially when they're in sequence and with the numbers marked, is all right to have but plenty tough to get rid of. It was hot money, very hot, and all Martin Francis offered them for it in clean cash was ten thousand dollars — they could take it or leave it.

I suppose they needed money badly to lay low for a while, and they took it. But it probably made them feel that they weren't getting any kind of a square deal. A day later the sorehead in the mob phoned in this tip to headquarters, without stopping to figure that if we got Martin Francis the whole thing would kick back on his own crowd. Anyway, there's your honor among thieves, and that's how we found out Martin Francis had this hot money now.

Which was a lot different from proving he had it. Even when a man carries a record like Martin Francis had pinned to him you've got to produce something definite to show a jury. Telephone tips aren't evidence. We hadn't known ourselves whether to believe this one or not, until he took off for Miami and some of the numbered bills began to show up there.

The Rube and I went down after him then, but it's a funny thing how chiselers can always feel the heat coming, even before it catches up with them. And when they feel that, nine times out of ten they always do the same thing — double back. Or it may be that Martin Francis had been smart enough to figure that those few bills would keep us down in Florida, checking up things there, while he'd

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be back in New York passing out the hot money wherever he could. As it was, we got to Florida only in time to take this boat north with him, and tonight, while he was eating, he gave us the first chance we had to look through his things.

Well, I hadn't turned up anything. After cussing a bit I put out the light, closed the door, and went out to the dining room, where the Rube was spooning up soup earnestly at our table. Over near the other end of the room I could see Martin Francis carving chicken — a perfect little gentleman, dressed in a neat dark-gray suit, with a linen handkerchief perked up in his breast pocket and an inconspicuous flower in his buttonhole. He had dark flat hair, parted in the middle, soft, almost womanish black eyes that had fooled a lot of people, and a tanned grave face that told you only what he wanted it to.

He didn't look up as I came in — just went on calmly working at his chicken. "Nothing?" the Rube asked, when I sat down.

"Less than that," I said, "if possible."

"Uh-huh," the Rube nodded. "I expected this, Mac. He wouldn't carry the money around with him unless he's crazy. It would be like putting a twenty-year rap in his pocket and then waiting for one of us to go over and serve it on him. He's not that dumb."

"I didn't think he would be," I said. "But sixty thousand is a lot of money and he's got it some place where he can keep his eye on it every minute. Somewhere on this boat."

"He could," the Rube pointed out, "have someone carrying it for him, Mac. One of the passengers. That would be his best bet. Say a friend of his or someone he picked up in Miami and offered a ride north if they'd carry it for him. See that?"

I saw it, but it didn't help us much. We couldn't look through every stateroom on the boat, or search the passengers in dark hallways. All we could do was keep our eyes on Martin Francis and hope something would break there. But I was afraid it wouldn't; one thing he was sure to do was to keep away from his carrier all the way up.

While we ate, the Rube and I chewed the thing over from a couple of angles, but we didn't get anywhere with it. Afterward I went to see the purser, but that drew a blank too. Martin Francis had left nothing there for them to hold. So the rest of the evening I spent sitting around the ballroom and watching Martin Francis, but looking — I hoped — as if I were just enjoying a cigar and listening to the music. The Rube meandered off somewhere by himself; along about ten o'clock he came in from the deck with a blonde.

They had a dance or two together before he introduced her as Miss Johnson. She was a pert little thing with a kind of high voice you could hear over a lot of others, pretty snappy-looking in a fluffy, tight-bodiced black dress, and all the atten-

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tion she paid to me was to ask me how I was, and call me honey kind of casually. A smart little girl that knew all the answers — I suppose she pegged the Rube for an umpchay as soon as she saw him.

Everyone did that. He was a big fellow, blond and well-built, with honest-looking gray eyes set deep in a face that appeared perpetually surprised — a full-moon face that looked simple and credulous and kind. A plainclothesman with a face like that is invaluable; set the Rube on any street in New York and before he'd gone two blocks someone was sure to stop him and offer to sell him a diamond ring for a dollar, or a genuine Hudson Seal coat for ten. It's a fact that one day a guy caught him standing around Penn Station and offered him a concession on the subway turnstiles for fifty dollars a week.

But underneath all that, he was a good cop, and a smart one. I liked to work with him because he never bothered with women much, and I can't stand anybody that fusses over women. Seeing him with this Miss Johnson kind of surprised me; it was the first time anything like that had happened. They danced a lot together and seemed to be having a fine time. Whenever the music stopped you could hear her high voice chattering at him. I was disgusted. You know, you could take one look at her and put down her history pretty accurately. A little too much make-up, a little too much figure — and smart, plenty smart, all the way.

Down in our stateroom, after Martin Francis had checked in for the night and I'd fixed it with his steward to let me know if he left it again, or if anyone called on him there, the Rube began to talk about her.

"She's a dancer," he told me. "In shows. Janie — that's a nice name. You like her, Mac?"

"Sure," I said. "I lost my heart right off. A bimbo like that would never take you for a dollar more than you owned."

The Rube grinned and dropped a shoe on the floor. "What did a woman ever do to you anyway, Mac?"

"Nothing," I said, "because I never gave any of them a chance."

He looked up at me with that serious way he had, so that you could never be quite sure whether he was kidding or not.

"She's a nice girl, Mac. A lot of fun. Besides, if I'm with her I can hang around Martin Francis and it won't look so suspicious."

"Oh, that," I said. I was relieved. For a second he'd had me worried.

Next day I watched Martin Francis stroll around the deck, and play games, and talk to some of the girls aboard, and have his meals. You wouldn't think it would be so tough a job watching a man enjoy himself, but I was worried every minute. The boat docked in New York the next day and we weren't any farther along than when we started. After all, you couldn't hang over his shoulder and listen to what he said to everyone he spoke to; but none of the conversa-

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tions looked serious. And nothing else came up to give us a lead.

That night after dinner, when he went to his cabin, I was almost relieved. This thing of watching and waiting and feeling every second that he was going to put one over on me got on my nerves. When I was sure he was in for the evening, and had the steward promise to keep an eye on his door, I went up on deck for a smoke and some quiet thought.

It was quiet up there at first — a nice night, with a breeze off the sea to make it pleasant, and a pumpkin slice of moon pinned halfway up the sky. A night for lovers, or just to get some fresh air, though what with thinking about Martin Francis I didn't enjoy my cigar very much. I just smoked it.

Pretty soon, too, I noticed it wasn't so deserted as it seemed. I almost fell over one or two couples in the shadowy parts of the deck, and that irritated me. All that stuff makes me sick because I can't understand how a full-grown man can be stupid enough to get hooked by it. Now I began to bump into them wherever I went. Even when I found a spot far forward, where the breeze came in sharp across the bows, there were two of them sitting out in deck chairs, in the thin moonlight.

The Rube and Janie. Tie that. They were holding hands and staring out over the sea, with her head tucked in against his shoulder. While I watched him that pert little face of hers lifted up to him, and the Rube, after looking down at it a second as if he wasn't quite sure what to do, kissed it. Then they snuggled up together and went back to watching the sea and holding hands.

I went down to our stateroom boiling. Something like that got me all stirred up. Here I couldn't even eat my meals thinking about that money, and all the Rube cared about his job was to waste the little time we had making love to that smart little doll. I tell you I was sore. It was an hour later before he came in, but I still wasn't asleep.

"Nice moon," I said, switching on the light. "Where was Martin Francis up there? Sitting between you?"

"Huh?" He blinked at the bulb. "I thought you were asleep. Listen, Mac —"

Someone rapped at the door then. It was Martin Francis's steward. He told me that Francis had left his cabin ten minutes ago and gone up on deck, and talked to somebody there. But they'd been standing in a dark corner and this dumb steward hadn't been able to see who the girl was — he didn't even have brains enough to follow her instead of Francis when she went below.

I banged the door on him without giving him a nickel. I was so mad I kicked my shoe all the way across the cabin and almost fractured my big toe. While I was still describing that steward the Rube looked queerly at me over a cigarette he'd lit. He said, "Don't get het up, Mac. I know who the girl was. Miss Johnson."

Some fellows are born that way.

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Here he hardly bothered his head about Francis all the way up from Florida, and yet when the break came it was dumped right into his lap. He'd left her on deck when she hinted it was getting pretty late and started down for the stateroom. Hers was on the other side of the boat and she started out as if she were going to bed, too. Then the Rube discovered he had left his cigarettes on the deck beside his chair and went back to get them. Janie and Martin Francis were talking together just where the Rube had left her.

"They didn't see you?"

"No. I stopped when I saw who they were, Mac. They must have talked there five minutes."

"There's your contact," I said, and I felt so good I decided to give that steward a buck, anyway, in the morning. "She's his carrier, and she got rid of you when it came time for him to show. Who'd see them that late on deck?"

"Yeah," the Rube said, without much life. "You going to pick the two of them up before we dock?"

"Hell, no. He won't touch the money until he's ashore and everything looks all right. And without that money in his hands we won't have a thing on him. All we got to do now is watch this Janie. When they're ashore he'll hook up with her again. There's our time."

"I guess so," the Rube said. He undressed slowly, looking at me a couple times before he went on. "You think she knows what she's doing, Mac?"

"That girl?" I said. "Don't be a dope. No one ever caught her off base in her life."

"I guess," the Rube said again. "She seemed kind of a funny kid. High-spirited. I liked her. I suppose she was never brought up in a convent, but that isn't her fault. She's had a pretty tough time, Mac, from what she told me. You know, I feel sorry for her."

All this time I hadn't been sure that he wasn't kidding, with that serious, peculiar humor of his.

"Now look," I said. "The boys call you Rube and you act it up to the hilt. But don't try to tell me you've gone over the jumps for something like *that*. Not little Janie."

After a pause the Rube said quietly, "You don't think I'm a sucker? You don't think that, do you?"

He got up and moved around with a lot of swing and vigor as he hung his clothes up — too much vigor. It was overdone. When I caught his eyes there was something wrong with them. A great light broke on me.

"Look," I said. "Did you ever go out with any other girl, Rube?"

"Me?" He laughed as if that were a great joke. "Why, I could tell you more about —"

"Some other time," I said. "You take a listen now. Women come in two grades — some are pests and the rest are poison. This Janie's poison."

"All right," the Rube said, with a white edge to his jaw. "Lay off the sermon, Mac. I don't want to hear any more about it. Pipe down."

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With that he knocked off the light and climbed into the bunk above me. But I knew he didn't sleep right away because I could hear him tossing there. You know, it was hard to believe anyone like the Rube, who had knocked around as much as he had, tripping up on something like this blonde. Me, now, I found out so much about women that they never bother me any more.

And the Rube was a type of guy you don't meet up with often. That kid's face of his wasn't altogether a front. I saw that now.

I gave him a lot of good advice before I went to sleep but he never said a word.

We docked next day about noon, and there were a couple of boys there from headquarters to see how things went. I put one of them on the girl and another on Martin Francis. They stopped at different places but of course that was in the cards too. He'd be very careful now until he was sure that everything was fine.

About two that afternoon, when she was downstairs having lunch, I went over to her hotel and had the clerk pass the Rube and me into her room. We'd thought out everything so that it all fitted together, but it was just thinking at that; there was always a chance we were wrong. The only way to make sure was to find that money; I was so worked up by then that I couldn't hold off any longer.

So we went up to her room and looked around. She didn't have much stuff — just two bags in a closet were all I could see — and after we'd poked around in the bureau I told the Rube to go downstairs and keep talking to her for ten minutes anyway. The bags wouldn't keep me any longer than that.

But he didn't want to leave at first. "What's the sense?" he asked me. "We can be through before she gets back."

"That's right," I said. "Let her make a sucker out of you and then be scared to look at her. Rube's the perfect name for you. No one could have picked a better one."

For a second he stared at me with his mouth set. Then he said, "Okay. Okay, Mac," and banged the door as he went out.

A quick frisk showed me the bags didn't have much in them. There were some dresses and shoes, all cheap and not very new, and a couple of jars of perfume and face powder. Most of the stuff from her first bag was out on the floor beside me when the door opened and she came in.

It would be hard to tell which of us was more surprised. She didn't scream or rush out into the hall the way another girl would have done, although she did move back quickly to the door and open it as soon as I got on my feet.

"If you've taken anything," she said, quietly enough, but as if she meant it, "put it back. If you haven't I'll give you ten seconds to get out of my room."

"That's decent of you, Janie," I

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said. "But let's talk first, huh? There's one or two —"

Without answering me at all she looked down at her watch for ten seconds and then looked up at me to let out quite calmly the damnedest shriek I ever heard. You know that's quite a sensation if you're not a married man and used to it — watching a woman not ten feet away yell at you as if you were strangling her. It was so unexpected and it made me so panicky that you know what I did? I actually started to scram out of there.

But on the way I got hold of myself and flung a pillow from the bed into her face. She just plucked it away from her lips like a bit of lint and went on screaming until the clerk who had passed us into her room ran in breathlessly.

"Miss Johnson!" he bleated. "Miss Johnson, now!" and looked at me appealingly: "He won't harm you, Miss Johnson. He — police, you know. We had to —"

Mopping his face, staring at me, then at her, he backed out and closed the door. The best thing, he'd have figured, was to leave us alone and hope we'd forget him entirely.

"What?" Janie said, her eyes widening. "Are you a policeman?"

"Surprise, surprise," I said. "Where's the money?"

"Money?"

"Money," I said. "You're in a tough spot, sister. Don't take the rap for Martin Francis — he wouldn't take it for you. Where is it?"

She took her coat off slowly and laid it on the bed, beside her bag.

"But I still don't know what you're talking about."

I told her without wasting any time being polite about it. I've known them to become haughty and too dignified for words when you got a little tough with them, but this Janie flared up in an instant. She called me a stupid-faced, flat-footed slob; four or five times she insisted on knowing exactly what I meant. If Charles were here I'd never —

It took me a little while to realize that Charles was Rube Malone. I hadn't heard him called that in years.

"Charles!" I said, getting mad then myself. "Lay off that Charles line. Rube Malone isn't a fall guy for anybody, though he might have looked it to you. He's a copper and a smart one. The second day out on the boat he spotted you for Martin Francis's girl. So don't think you've got an out there. Where's the cash?"

"For what?" Janie repeated, as if she hadn't heard my question about the money at all. "For what?" She came toward me and for a second I thought she was going to sock me, small as she was.

I got behind a chair. "Now behave," I said. "All this won't get you —"

That was the time Rube Malone picked to show up. Standing in the middle of the floor, those eyes of hers shining with rage, Janie turned her head to see who it was. Rube stared back at her.

"What's he doing here looking

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through my bags?" she demanded furiously. "What's he talking about? He says you're a policeman and you just spoke to me on the boat because you wanted to find out something about Mr. Francis. Is he crazy or what? Tell him why you —"

Her words came slower and slower as she looked at him. They stopped finally, and she stood there staring dumbly at him. In a moment her face lost all its pertness. It got sharp and intent, strained about the mouth. After a moment she said, "Oh. He's — he's right. It wasn't because you liked me then, or because —"

Without looking at her the Rube smoothed his hat sullenly with one palm.

"I had to find out what I could. That's what I'm paid for, understand? Maybe I look like a sucker but I'm not one. Not altogether."

"No," Janie answered slowly. "Of course not. But your line was good. You were a lot different. You were — Oh, hell," Janie said, shrugging her shoulders. Suddenly her eyes were all surface again, hard surface. "Now what?"

"Now act your age," the Rube said harshly. "You're Francis's woman and there's no sense trying to talk like a kid out of the cornfields. Skip it."

"Of course," Janie said, with a kind of silly smile on her lips, never taking her eyes off him for a minute. "That would be silly, wouldn't it? I'm a long time out of the cornfields — I've danced in cheap shows ever since I was big enough to look like something pretty good to the boys in the front row. I guess you saw that; your friend says you're a very smart cop. I could be a lot of fun at first and then I could be useful to you. It must have been pretty easy to make me feel that you liked me. But you didn't like me really — why should you? I was cheap and unimportant and casual. I wasn't the kind of girl to take seriously."

The Rube looked up at her then. "Were you?" he said.

Little Janie smiled at him — not a bitter smile nor a sad one, nor an amused one either. A sort of understanding smile, as if she made out something now she hadn't seen clearly before. You know, I felt kind of sorry for her; the anger was out of her face now, and there was a look in its place that didn't belong to a hardboiled blonde named Janie Johnson at all.

"Was I?" she said. "I thought so, if that matters. Maybe I do a lot of things wrong — nobody ever taught me how to talk or dress or what to do with forks. I'm dumb that way, I guess. And you saw that too. I suppose it put some kind of mark on me. But one thing," Little Janie said, the quietest I'd ever heard her say anything, "one thing I did learn. I looked out for myself. I had to, ever since I've been out of those cornfields you mentioned. I was never Martin Francis's girl nor anybody's girl. But you don't believe that, do you?"

"Okay," the Rube said angrily. "What's the argument about? What's the squawk? You find what you were looking for Mac?"

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After I shook my head he went over to the bags and opened them again. Janie didn't say anything to stop him. Sitting on the bed, watching us turn everything in the room upside down, she never said a word until we were finished.

"I think I know what you want," she said then, looking at Rube. "Would you like me to give it to you?"

That wry, small smile was fixed on him steadily, almost contemptuously; under it he flushed.

I said, "What else do you think we came up here for?"

"I wouldn't know," she told me. "Neither of you ever explained. I was stranded in Miami when I met Martin Francis through a friend of mine. He said he'd pay my way north if I'd carry a package for him that contained some very important law papers. He said he was afraid they might be stolen from him on the boat and all he wanted me to do was carry them, because the men who were trying to get them away from him would never suspect me."

"Where's the package now?"

Sitting on the bed, she stared past me at the window.

"What? The package? It's downstairs, at the desk. I mailed it here from Miami before we sailed because I was afraid I might lose it, or have it stolen from me. Mailing it seemed safest. They told me when I checked in that they were holding it for me."

"Mailed it!" I said. We'd been pretty dumb. "If Martin Francis had been smart enough to do that, he wouldn't have had a thing to worry about."

"But he couldn't," Little Janie told me, with that tired expression in her eyes as if she didn't care whether or not I heard her. "I met him that first night in a café, and there was a man across the room who watched everything he did. He told me then the man was one of the gang that was trying to get these papers away from him, but I suppose it must have been one of the Miami detectives you had watching him."

"Johansen," I said. "A big red-haired fellow with buck teeth?"

Little Janie nodded. "Yes. He had the package out in the checkroom then, and when he handed me the menu he slipped the check over the top of it. I suppose he was afraid that the detective might stop him and open the package if he claimed it going out."

"Not Johansen," I said. "The dope should have checked him when he went in with it. But he doesn't figure out things like that for himself. And I suppose Francis never spotted him until he was inside the café. He should have known this Johansen like I do. Then he wouldn't have bothered with you at all."

Anyway, in the end, it was as simple as that. Five minutes after she had them bring it up, the Rube and I were looking at a paper-wrapped parcel about the size of a shoebox. It was stacked with money — fifties and hundreds in crisp new sheafs. And it was the hot money all right — sixty

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thousand dollars in a package that a kid could carry under one arm.

"Well, there it is," I said, and I felt a lot better after seeing it. "When is he coming for it?"

"Today," Janie said dully.

It might have been his cue. The door banged around fast into the wall and he came in after it with a thin tall man who had eyebrows high up on his pasty face that looked as if someone had dipped the broad end of a cigar in ink and then smeared it from one side of his forehead to the other without leaving any break for the nose. They both had automatics. The man with the eyebrows didn't seem altogether comfortable carrying his.

"Hello," Martin Francis said, looking at all of us, while Eyebrows shouldered the door shut. The package was open on the bed, in plain view; he couldn't miss it. But after a first quick glance he kept his eyes on the Rube and me.

"Preparedness," he said, chuckling deep down in his throat. "I believe in that — and a little piece of luck to go along with it. I just did get off the elevator in time to see the kid handing that package in. You know, I had a hunch what it was." He chuckled again before adding quietly to Janie, "How much did they give you to sell me out?"

As she got off the bed Janie gave him a puzzled, glassy smile. "You too?" she said. Of course he didn't know what she was talking about, but the Rube's cheeks colored up in a slow flush.

"Over there," Martin Francis told him. "Against the wall with your sidekick. Leave the money where it is."

While I was doing that he tucked the paper in around the package again and put it under his arm.

"Now get your coat," he ordered Janie, and opened the closet door at the end of the bureau. "In here," he told the Rube and me. "They tell me it's so soundproof you can yell in there all night without disturbing anybody. That makes it perfect."

Very slowly the Rube went over to the closet and stopped in the doorway, jerking his head back to Janie without looking around.

"What do you want with her?"

"Maybe," Martin Francis answered, his voice surprised and soft, "I think I owe something to people that sell me out. And maybe she's just my idea of good company. Either way it's not your business. I told you to move in there, brother."

"She didn't sell you out," the Rube said, "because she never knew what it was you gave her to hold."

Martin Francis agreed to that with a slow, rather curious nod.

"No, she didn't. But it still isn't your business. I'll handle my end. Start moving."

But all the Rube did was to turn then from him to Janie and stare at her with that big, serious face of his — stare at her gravely and for quite a long time. Not a shadow crossed her expression. With the coat drawn around her, she returned his look steadily. She certainly wasn't asking

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for help; and the Rube must have seen that. But he must have seen something else too that none of us did, because the first thing he said was, "All right, Janie, forget that other stuff. And don't be scared. I'll take care of this."

"You will?" Martin Frances said. There was something in his voice that sent prickles up my back. Eyebrows must have felt it too, because he shifted nervously and wet his lips.

"Lookit, Marty," he began.

Still standing by the bed, her face still expressionless, Janie picked up her bag. "You'll take care of me?" Her face broke into that funny little smile again. "Why? Why should you? There's no need for it. I can't do anything for you now. I can't help you any more."

"Who was talking about that?" the Rube said. "This heel wants to even up with you. He's yellow and what he calls tough and he figures he owes you something. A beating maybe — or just to take you around with him until he feels like ditching you. I can't let him do that, Janie."

He was talking to her as if the rest of us weren't in the room at all. And I was worried — this Martin Francis was tough. He wasn't kidding about that part of it. I had heard enough about him to be sure he wasn't all wind and words. He didn't want to knock off the Rube; he'd rather get out of the room nice and quiet. But if he had to —

For a second or two he just stood there watching the Rube. Eyebrows was getting more nervous every moment.

"Now wait a minute," he said. His teeth chattered a little. "Don't go getting heated up, Marty. We have the money. Let's blow. You don't want this dame and he won't make any kick if you leave her here. Use your head, Marty."

But I suppose by then it was a question of pride with Martin Francis. Like all little guys, he had more than his share of that. Anyway, he just bumped Eyebrows away with his shoulder and told the Rube to get started.

That damn fool acted as if he didn't even hear him.

"Maybe you think I'm a louse," he was saying to Janie, "and I guess in a way I am. Mac can't stand women and he told me a lot of stuff I was stupid enough to believe. I must have been crazy, Janie. But you see how it was, don't you? I thought you took me for a chump and it made me sore. But I wasn't kidding — not on the boat. I thought you were the swellest girl I'd ever met. I think so now."

If I didn't like women, you could see a reason for it right there. In a spot like this all the Rube wanted to do was explain things to her! I tried to shove him but he resisted my push solidly. Then Martin Francis called him a name in a choppy voice and I knew it was all over. No more talking. The little guy was jittery now and insane with rage.

Eyebrows was looking so scared that I think if I blew my breath at him

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he'd have flopped over. "Watch yourself, Marty," he was babbling. "Don't lose your head —"

Martin Francis brushed him back to the wall again as if he were a fly. But this Eyebrows, in a panic, grabbed his arm as he went and I grabbed the ice-water pitcher that was right by me on the dresser.

"Marty!" Eyebrows yelled. "I ain't in on no killing. I —"

The pitcher was on its way then. Martin Francis saw it coming and ducked. But it caught him high on the shoulders and bounced up onto his ear, staggering him. By the time he wrenched his gun loose from Eyebrows I had hold of the wrist over it and was cracking it down hard against the glass-topped corner of the dresser.

He shot, but the bullet plowed under my arm into the mirror. Then the bone in his wrist cracked like a stick breaking and his automatic bounced twice on the glass and hopped into my hand just as if we'd rehearsed it. I gave him the barrel over that small neat skull of his once and that was more than enough. He went down still holding on to the money but he never knew he had it. Eyebrows did nothing but bawl that he wasn't in on anything like this. No killing!

"Hey!" the Rube said, tearing out of the closet doorway. "You need any help, Mac?"

I couldn't give him a fitting answer at the moment because I felt as weak and shaky as Eyebrows looked. And he wasn't really concerned about me anyway; all that worried him was Janie. Was she frightened? Was she hurt?

I knew I couldn't do anything for him then, no matter what I said. He was sunk. As soon as she began to act sore and as if she wouldn't listen to what he was telling her, I saw that. It was his own fault. When they get like that it's just too bad. The Rube was gone.

So of course they were married after the trial was over and this friend Janie had in Miami told how she'd introduced Janie to Martin Francis, and how he said he had some important law papers he wanted someone to take north. They were married that afternoon.

And who do you think was best man? Me! I still don't know how they talked me into *that!*

NEXT MONTH . . .

The vivid study of a Swiss gigolo —

AARON MARC STEIN's *This Was Willi's Day*

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **DAVID ALEXANDER**

TITLE: ***The Man Who Went to Taltavul's***

TYPE: Tour de force

LOCALE: Boston

TIME: 1890 — and a day ten years later

COMMENTS: *An unforgettable incident in the Horatio Alger boyhood of the young bootblack who took care of The Man Who Always Wept — that gray and evil old man who bore an infamous name and was driven by a monstrous guilt . . .*

I SUPPOSE THERE ARE FEW MEN ALIVE who remember Barnaby's Tavern in Boston.

Barnaby's was on Milk Street, near the Old Market, and it was a great, glittering place with blazing gas chandeliers and twinkling tiers of crystal bottles and huge gold-framed mirrors, and a gleaming stretch of ornately carved mahogany that was famed as the longest bar in the world. The bartenders were proper bartenders, too, wide-shouldered beefy men with spit curls, abundant mustaches, starched aprons, and diamond stickpins. To a boy my age — I was a stripling of eleven when I first walked into Barnaby's — all the customers were heroes. John L. Sullivan, the Boston Strong Boy himself, set up drinks for the house at Barnaby's every time he was home from one of his triumphal tours. A waspish little dude of a man who was sports editor of the *Transcript* held court there; he had earned great prestige by picking Spokane to beat the vaunted Proctor Knott in the Kentucky Derby the year before. The bluff, bearded police chief often came in mufti to drink his four-ounce-shots of Maryland rye. Pompous politicians from the State House elected governors of Massachusetts in the back room.

It was at Barnaby's that I met The Man Who Always Wept.

I don't wish to give the impression that I was a precocious alcoholic or a juvenile delinquent when I tell you I frequented a saloon at the tender age of eleven. I went to Barnaby's because of one of the most powerful

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moral forces of my youth, Horatio Alger. Alger was born in Revere, the beach district near Boston, and in 1890 he was living in nearby Natick. I never saw him, but I felt very close to him in spirit. It seemed to me that all the main characters of *Pluck and Luck* and *Tattered Tom* and *Ragged Dick* had widowed mothers. In this respect, at least, I qualified as an Alger hero. My father had died before I was born. He left my mother a comfortable house, but she went out to families in Louisburg Square to do "day sewing," as dressmaking was called in the Nineties. Actually, she was well paid for her genteel work and we lacked for none of the comforts of life. But many of Alger's characters had been bootblacks before they stopped a runaway team and saved the banker's daughter, so I bought polish, made myself a crude bootblack stand, and after school I sought customers on the streets and in the more respectable saloons like Barnaby's. I saved the nickels and dimes and, in time, the dollar bills we called "frogskins" in those days, hiding them in a secret cache in my room. I felt sure that some day a villainous character with a waxed mustache would storm into our little home waving a mortgage at my mother, despite the fact that I knew our house was free and clear of such entailment. I was prepared to uncover my hoard when he arrived, pay off the mortgage, and hurl the dastardly villain bodily from the house.

Barnaby's was my lushest source of income. The sporting gentry and politicians there would nearly always pay a dime, and sometimes even a quarter, if they were in their cups. It's true that my special hero, the chief of police, never gave me more than a nickel for his shine, but he would accompany it with good advice. "Industry and thrift, my boy," he'd say. "Industry and thrift — and keep away from bad companions. Remember that and you'll never have business at my place." My great ambition was to black the boots of John L. Sullivan, who had knocked out Jake Kilrain in the 75th round of their bare-knuckle fight at Richburg, Mississippi, the year before. But I was never lucky enough to be in Barnaby's when the champion was present. It was part of the Sullivan legend that he would pay a frogskin to the boys who blacked his boots.

The Man Who Always Wept stood alone at the far end of Barnaby's long bar. He was a spare man and he seemed very old to me, although I suppose he was only in his sixties. I always thought of him as the gray man. He wore an old gray suit and an old gray hat. His hair was gray and so was the stubble of beard on his face. But it was his flesh most of all that gave me the impression of grayness. His skin was the color of death.

He would stand there alone, hour after hour, drinking as long as he had any money in his pocket, speaking to no one, living on a forlorn and desolate little island of his own making. After a while he would begin to

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weep. He was not noisy or ostentatious in his weeping — there was a peculiar kind of dignity to his grief. The tears would begin to flow down his cheeks and he would stand there staring into his glass, not even bothering to wipe the tears away. I had never seen any person who was so desperately unhappy, and I was drawn to him through sympathy.

"Why does the old man always cry?" I asked a bartender one day.

He shrugged his meaty shoulders. "It's the drink," he said. "It makes some laugh and it makes some fight and it makes some weep. He's the kind that weeps, that's all."

I had seen The Man Who Always Wept several times before I had the courage to approach him. One day I walked up to him and asked him most respectfully if he'd care to have his boots blacked. He shook his head at me sadly. "No, son," he said. "I'm a man who's driven by the Devil. I must spend all the nickels I have on the Devil's poison — I can't waste them on such things as polish for my boots."

Somehow I felt he was desperately in need of help. I longed to show him some kindness, so I offered him the only thing I had to give.

"There's mud on your shoes, sir," I said. "Just let me brush it off for you. There'll be no charge."

Without waiting for his permission I dropped to my knees and began to brush his cracked old boots. When I had finished, I looked up at him. He was weeping silently.

"You should not do that, boy," he said. "I am an evil man. Stay away from evil companions. I've heard the police chief tell you that. It's good advice. I am evil and all who trust me come to harm."

When he stopped talking, his shoulders shook.

I stood there for a moment, tongue-tied and embarrassed. On a sudden impulse I touched his arm. He shrank away. "Don't touch me, boy," he said. "Stay away from me. I am an evil man who spent an evil night in an evil place — and I am damned forever."

The next day I asked my friend, the bartender, "What is the name of the man who is always crying?"

"He calls himself Smith," the barman said. "It is as good a name as any."

"What does he do?" I asked. "Why is he so sad?"

"He drinks, that's all. He drinks until his money's gone and then he staggers off to wherever he lives so he can sleep a while and then drink again. Also, he broods on his sins."

"Is he a murderer?" I asked.

The bartender tapped his head. "He is a drunk. His sins are in his head."

I have discovered there is a queer affinity between old men and young boys. Perhaps it is because both old men and young boys know a great truth that is hidden from the others. They know that the things that really happen are of no importance; it's only the things that happen in the head which count.

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Now that I am old I spend many fine days sitting on a bench in the public gardens of Boston Common and almost always some young sprout of eight to twelve will wander up and regard me speculatively. Just the other day a moppet of nine or ten who wore a Davy Crockett cap came up to me and began a conversation. "You're awful old, aren't you?" he asked.

I agreed that I was pretty old.

"You old enough to remember Davy Crockett?" he inquired.

I smiled and said, "Not quite."

"He's alive," my young friend told me. "I saw him just the other day on Commonwealth Avenue. He wears a coonskin cap like mine and he's got a buckskin suit with fringe all around it and now he's got a long, white beard. He don't carry his rifle any more. He's kind of feeble and he carries a long stick that he leans on. He didn't get killed at the Alamo. He was the only one escaped. He *told* me so."

"That's very interesting," I said inadequately.

My young friend's face grew puzzled. "He must be about a hundred-fifty years old by now," he said. "Can anybody really live that long?"

"Sure," I answered. "A man can live that long if he has good dreams inside his head."

"He's got good dreams, I guess," the boy declared, happy to confirm the existence of his hero. "The Indians and Andy Jackson and the Alamo and all."

The dreams inside the head of The Man Who Always Wept were bad dreams, black nightmare figments of violence and evil so repugnant to him that he dared only to hint at the horror of them. My own dreams in those days were bright ones — Alger dreams of catching a runaway horse and marrying the banker's daughter and buying my mother a castle to live in. Yet a strange kinship grew up between the eleven-year-old bootblack and The Man Who Always Wept. Every day, after I had served my paying customers in Barnaby's, I would stoop and brush the shoes of the man who drank alone; and at last he accepted my small gesture without protest. In time I not only brushed his shoes, I also polished them. He offered to pay me for this, but I would not take his money. He seemed so old and his clothes were so shabby. I knew he could not afford the luxury of a daily shine.

One afternoon he ordered his glass refilled while I was polishing his cracked old shoes and he discovered he had no more money to pay. A stricken look came into his gaunt face. It was a look of terror, the look of a man deprived of his last defense against nightmare horrors. A two-ounce glass of bar whiskey cost fifteen cents at Barnaby's. I slipped three nickels into my friend's trembling hand.

Not long after that I took him home for the first time.

It was winter and there was snow and ice and slush on Milk Street. The

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Man Who Always Wept grew more wan and feeble by the day, it seemed. On this occasion he fairly staggered from the saloon after his money had been spent, supporting himself against chairs and tables as he steered his uncertain course toward the door. The men who lined the bar watched his progress with mingled expressions of amusement and disgust. I wanted to take my friend's arm and help support him, but I sensed that this would only embarrass him. As soon as he stepped into the street he slipped and fell heavily. Some of the men at the bar who were watching through the plate-glass window hooted with laughter. An irascible old bluenose from Beacon Hill sniffed disdainfully and told the bartender that sots should not be permitted to drink at the bar with gentlemen who could hold their liquor. No one went out to help the fallen man. He was now attempting to scramble to his feet on the slick sidewalk, threshing about with the frantic futility of a large fish that has been washed up on dry land.

I was the only one who went to his assistance. I was a well-grown boy for my age, but it took all my strength to get the old man to his feet. He had hurt his leg and there was blood on his face. Tears were running down his face, too, but they were not the tears of pain or rage; they were the tears, it seemed to me, of a man who has abandoned hope.

The man who called himself Smith lived in a decaying neighborhood of warren tenements near the Old Market, not far from Barnaby's. Our staggering journey over the slippery streets was a perilous one. Twice I fell and the old man plummeted down on top of me. Once a fat policeman whose face was cherry-red from the cold stopped us. "Is that your grandfather, son?" he asked me.

"No, sir," I replied. "He is a friend."

When the policeman walked away the old man I was supporting broke into peals of drunken laughter. "Friend!" he exclaimed. "No human being has been my friend since that evil night!"

The wooden house he lived in was ancient and rickety and sagged under heavy festoons of icicles suspended from the eaves. He roomed in a dark cubicle on the topmost floor and it took almost a quarter of an hour for me to drag my burden up the groaning stairs. A bed, a washstand, a chair, an old trunk, and a little stove were in the room — that was all. The wide-board floors were bare.

The Man Who Always Wept dropped on the bed without removing his wet, torn overcoat and he fell at once into a fitful sleep. I stood by, not knowing what to do. It was cold. There were a few sticks of wood by the stove; I found some paper and matches and made a fire. A stale piece of bread and a half-filled bottle of milk stood on the window sill. Beside the bed there was another bottle with a very small amount of whiskey in it.

The old man began to mutter in his sleep. "The door," he said. "The

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white door." Then he would groan and mumble something unintelligible about a box. I looked about the room. There was no box there and I wondered if he were referring to the trunk.

I sat by the stove while the shadows deepened outside the smeared little pane of window. Finally the old man awakened with a cry and jerked upright in the bed. He sat there shaking with a terrible seizure.

"Go away!" he screamed. "You must not stay with me. I am an evil man!"

He groped for the bottle beside the bed and drank the remaining whiskey at a gulp. Faint color came into his pasty face, and the shaking stopped. I lighted a smoky, evil-smelling lamp, poured water from a pitcher, went to the bed, and began to wipe the blood from his face with a wet rag.

He tried to push me off. "Don't!" he begged. "I belong to the Devil, boy. I've lived in hell for twenty-five years now. You mustn't touch me."

I went about my business despite his protests. I got the clothes off his scrawny old body, found a frayed nightshirt, and forced him to put it on. Then I covered him with a threadbare blanket.

"I don't think you are evil," I told him. "You are only sick."

"Ha!" he cried. "You don't know me, boy. You don't know my name, do you?"

"The barman told me your name was Smith."

He shook his head and a cunning look came into his eyes.

"My name is not Smith," he said.

"You spoke about a door while you were sleeping," I said. "A white door."

He threw off the blanket and his talon-hand clutched my shoulder. "Don't mention the white door!" he cried.

I was persistent. I was determined to discover what nightmare fancies made the old man weep.

"You spoke about a box, too," I said. "Was that a secret? Where is the box? Do you keep your money in it?"

He laughed bitterly. "Money," he said. "I have no money. Each month there is a tiny sum from an inheritance. I pay my lodging, buy a crust or two, and then I put the rest inside the trunk there. I take out a few coins for my booze each day and when I've spent them I come back here and lie in darkness . . . with my memories. Remember the trunk, boy. Some day they'll find me dead. I haven't got much longer before the Devil takes me. When it happens, open the trunk. If it's early in the month there may be a few coins left. I will them to you. I make you the heir of an evil man."

"Are the coins in the box you mentioned in your sleep?" I asked.

"No, no. The coins are in a little rawhide bag at the bottom of the trunk."

"What was in the box? Treasure? Pirate treasure?"

The sly look had come into his face again. His pale lips twisted into a mocking smile. "Yes, you might say there was treasure in it," he replied.

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"Was the box behind the door?"

"Yes," he answered, in a barely audible whisper. "The box was behind the door."

"Did you steal the pirate treasure and did the pirate gang hand you the black spot and mark you to be murdered?"

"There was murder," he said. "There was murder and there was worse that dark night."

"Are *you* a murderer?" I asked, fearful of his answer.

"I am a murderer who never killed," he said.

Suddenly the awful trembling shook him again. The little room was warm now from the stove but his teeth were chattering. When he had controlled the spasm, he said, "I must have whiskey, boy. There's a brass key to the trunk in the pocket of my coat. Get it and find the rawhide bag with the money in it. Then go to the grog shop on the corner and buy me a pint."

"No," I said. "You've had enough to drink already."

"Please, boy," he begged. "I've got to have it to kill the monsters of the past — they won't be long in coming now. Get the booze for me and I will tell you a terrible secret, a secret no one knows."

"About the door and the box?" I asked.

"Better," he said. "I will tell you my name."

"Is it a famous name?"

"It is an infamous name. Hurry, boy."

I got the whiskey for him, wondering what an Alger hero would have done under similar circumstances. I consoled my conscience by telling myself that he looked so sick he might die if he did not get the stimulant he craved. But I knew in my heart it was curiosity that prompted me to run his errand.

When he had drunk from the bottle, he gasped for a moment and I thought he was going to fall asleep.

"You promised me!" I said.

"Yes," he answered. "I will tell you my name, boy. It is an awful secret and you must keep it until I'm dead. My name is John F. Parker."

The name meant nothing at all to me. I cudgeled my brains. "I — I think there was a fellow named Parker who rode with Jesse James," I said.

"No, boy. I never rode with outlaws."

"Then maybe you were a Western marshal, out in the Dakota Territory?"

He smiled at me sadly and took another drink from the bottle. "I've never been West," he said. "I guess you wouldn't know my name. You're too young for that. But it's a name that men and the Devil will never forget. Go away, now. I want to sleep."

He had drunk nearly half the bottle and he fell into a deep, snorting sleep. It was almost supper-time and my mother would be worried about me. I had left my bootblack stand at Barnaby's, but I knew the barman would take care of it. I checked the dying fire in the little stove, snuffed out the lamp, and hurried home.

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The next day I went to Barnaby's and saw The Man Who Always Wept — the man with an infamous name I did not recognize — standing in his usual place at the end of the bar. I decided not to approach him until I had blacked the boots of my customers, as usual.

The bearded police chief stood almost the entire length of the long bar away from Smith, or Parker, or whatever his real name might be. I ventured to ask the chief a bold question, despite the fact that the drunken old man had sworn me to secrecy.

"Sir, was there ever a great criminal named Parker?" I inquired.

"Parker?" he said, wrinkling up his brow. "Why, indeed there was, my boy. The South Boston Butcher, he was called. Chopped the heads off three women with his meat axe, he did. We caught him in the end, of course, and stretched his neck on the gallows. Bloody Billy Parker, the Butcher Boy. That's what the papers called him."

"Not Billy Parker," I said. "John Parker. John *F.* Parker. Have you ever heard of him?"

"Plenty of criminals in the world and some of them named Parker, I suppose," the chief answered curtly. He seemed offended that his identification of Bloody Bill had not impressed me. "Can't say I remember any John *F.* Parker, though."

That night, by tacit consent, I walked home again with The Man Who Always Wept. I did not have to support him this time, except to take his elbow when we crossed streets churned to deep slush by the carriages and wagons.

Day after day for months I would walk him home to the bleak building near the Old Market. I would finish blacking my customers' boots in Barnaby's, then I would go down to the end of the bar and stoop at the old man's feet and make his scuffed shoes as presentable as possible with my brush and rags and polish. By that time he had nearly always spent the last coin of the small amount he allowed himself for his daily drinking at the bar. In the late afternoon we would leave the bar together and the other patrons would regard us curiously, but they made no comment. They seemed to sense that there was some bond between us that they could not understand. The old man grew feebler week by week. It took us a long time to walk the short distance, but he never became as drunk as he had been that first day, and he never fell to the sidewalk again. Often we met the beefy cop with the cherry-red face. He would wave his nightstick at me and say, "I see you're taking good care of your friend, young fellow."

The old man and I played a little game. I think that toward the end his interest in the game was all that kept him alive, for he had nothing else in his life except his dismal room, his few hours at Barnaby's, and the memories which he called the monsters of the past. Almost every day he would give me some sly hint about

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himself and the thing that he had done, and a certain light would come into his dim and reddened eyes as if he were challenging me to solve the riddle. I would question him and sometimes he would not answer me at all except with a sidelong glance, in which there was a sort of bitter amusement. Sometimes he would answer me in meaningless words that only added to my confusion.

"There was the white door," he would say. "And don't forget the box. And John F. Parker was not there." At first my look of puzzlement would amuse him, but then he would begin to think his dark thoughts again and the tears would come.

I made further inquiries — discreetly, I fancied — about the identity of John F. Parker. I asked the sports editor of the *Transcript* if he had ever heard of such a man, because I considered any journalist a brilliant man with a vast store of esoteric knowledge. He pursed his lips and looked wise. "There was a sparring partner of old John L.'s who had a name like that, I think. A clever ringman with a fast left jab, but no match for our Strong Boy, of course."

One day the old man said to me, "Tell me, boy. What will you do when you grow up? It's time to think about it so you won't waste your life as I have."

"I'm going to be a journalist," I answered immediately. "I am going to write pieces under my name for the *Transcript*."

"Do journalists make good money?" he asked.

"Of course," I answered in my innocence, not realizing that members of the Fourth Estate were then the worst paid workers in the world, aside from Chinese coolies.

"Then you will do something for me," said my friend. "I will die soon — the Devil is on his way. They will find me dead one morning and I will go to the real Hell instead of the one I've been living in. They'll toss my carcass into a hole in Potter's Field and there'll be no gravestone to mark the place. When you grow up and make your fortune you must buy a gravestone for me. Promise."

I promised him I would.

"There is an inscription you must have cut upon the stone," he said. We were in his little room that day. He pushed a piece of butcher's paper and a pencil stub before me. "Write it down," he said. "Write it down so the stone-cutter will have it right."

I sat with pencil poised.

"No name on the gravestone," he said. "No dates or pretty sentiments. Just a plain, square stone with these words on it: *THE MAN WHO WENT TO TALTAVUL'S.*"

I asked him how "Taltavul's" was spelled. He spelled it out for me twice, letter by letter.

"I never heard of Taltavul's," I said. "Where is it? Is it a town in Massachusetts?"

"It is the evil place I went to on that evil night," he answered. He was playing the game again.

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I began to make inquiries again among the customers at Barnaby's, but none of them had ever heard of Taltavul's. I even got my father's heavy old gazeteer down from the bookshelves and read over all the fine print in the back, searching down the page with a polish-blackened finger. My eyes ached from squinting at the many maps. But I could find no such place as Taltavul's.

That summer Boston sweltered from a heat wave, and the old man seemed to fail and shrink before my eyes. In the fall, on Halloween, my friend and I stood on a curbing and watched the traditional parade of the Society of Ancients and Horribles. As the masked, grotesque figures passed, he said, "The creatures of my dreams are more frightening."

And then it was winter again and there was early snow in New England.

I had bought the old man a Christmas present with the dimes and nickels from my secret trove. He needed a warm coat. I couldn't afford that, of course, but I had purchased a heavy woolen muffler.

On Christmas Eve I went to Barnaby's. The place was festive with holly and red paper streamers and the customers were gaily boisterous, toasting the holiday with egg nogs and Tom-and-Jerries and hot buttered rums.

My heart sank when I entered the place. Many customers greeted me and asked me to black their boots. They would have tipped well because of the season, but I dropped my bootblack stand and ran out into the snow, the package I had wrapped in tissue tucked beneath my arm.

I ran all the way to the dingy street near the Old Market. The door of the wooden house was never locked. I went into the hall and my feet clattered up the creaking flights.

I found him on his bed, an empty bottle beside him, and I knew at once that he was dead.

The Devil had come at last for The Man Who Always Wept.

I dropped my Christmas gift on the floor. I did not remember my inheritance in the trunk, and I stumbled down the stairs. Outside I met the beefy policeman with the cherry-red face and I told him what had happened. He patted my shoulder in a kindly fashion and told me he would take care of everything. I trudged home through the swirling snow, tears streaming down my face.

I had left my bootblack stand at Barnaby's, but I never went back for it. It was ten years before I entered the place again.

When I went back to Barnaby's I was old enough to cast my first vote (I would cast it for McKinley and Teddy Roosevelt, of course). I would graduate from Harvard at the June Commencement. I recall the date quite clearly, because it was a milestone in my life — April 14, 1900.

I had been interviewed that afternoon by the august editor of the *Transcript* and had been engaged as a reporter, my duties to begin directly after my graduation. Soon, I thought, I would be able to keep my promise

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and buy the gravestone for my friend in Potter's Field. I was to be paid the princely sum of ten dollars a week. The *Transcript* started most of its reporters at seven dollars, but the editor was a Harvard trustee and offered bonuses to graduates of the college who joined his staff. I was treading air that fine spring day, because my own life was about to begin with the death of a century. I felt I should celebrate. I drank only moderately, but I decided impulsively that I would toast my luck and the old man's memory at Barnaby's, where we had first met.

Barnaby's had belonged to the Nineteenth Century and it was dying with it. The electric bulbs that had replaced the shimmering gaslight shone nakedly on the dust and desolation. The silence was an oppressive pall in this place where convivial men had laughed and roistered. The bartenders were no longer sleek andplump and mustached, and the aprons they wore were spotted. Half the long bar had been fenced off, and I fancied that ghosts drank in the shadowy reaches that had been closed. It was there that The Man Who Always Wept had stood day after day fighting the monsters of the past.

There were pitifully few customers and, like Barnaby's itself, all of them seemed to belong to the past. I recognized two aging gentlemen with white beards who wore frock coats and flat-topped bowler hats, and I placed myself beside them to order my drink. Each had served his State in the Congress. Of course they did not know that the tall young man next to them was the same lad who had once blacked their boots. Suddenly one of the bearded men made a startling remark. He said, "Yes, it is a memorable day."

Could they have heard of my great fortune, I wondered? I grinned at my own foolishness.

The other old man was saying, "Yes, it was just thirty-five years ago today that it happened. And the tragic part is that it needn't have happened at all if that policeman had only remained to guard the door. The box would have been safe then. What was his name? Parks? Parkman? Parker? Something like that, I think."

The other old man said, "I recall him. He went to Taltavul's that night."

I could restrain myself no longer. I fairly shouted, "Please, sir! You mentioned Taltavul's! What was it? Where was it?"

The two old men were Proper Bostonians. They glared at me to put me in my place. But one of them answered.

"You are an impetuous young man, sir," he said. "It is not good manners to raise your voice and interrupt the conversation of your elders. I have noted that the younger generation is lacking in respect and courtesy. Nevertheless, I will oblige you with the information you request. Taltavul's was a drinking establishment much like this one. It was on Tenth Street in the city of Washington.

"It was, in fact, next door to Ford's Theater."

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Author's Note

John F. Parker, who could have prevented the murder of Abraham Lincoln, is a hazy figure of history, seldom mentioned by name in the chronicles of the event. He was one of the six members of Washington's Metropolitan Police Force assigned as the President's bodyguards. He had served briefly in the Union Army and had joined the Force to avoid further service. When he was about to be drafted, Mrs. Lincoln interceded for him. He was a chronic alcoholic. On April 14, 1865 (the day Booth shot Lincoln and a date important to this story) he was drunk and was three hours late reporting for duty. He was supposed to report at 4 P.M., but he did not arrive until 7. Had he been just a little later, or had he not reported at all, Lincoln's life would have been saved, because Cook, the man he relieved, was a conscientious officer.

The white-painted door of Box 7 in Ford's Theater which Lincoln occupied on the fatal night had a broken lock. The key had been mislaid and a few days previously a theater employee had broken off the lock. It had not been replaced. Parker must have seen the lock was broken, but he did not remain at his post outside the closed door. Once Lincoln and his party were in the box, he went next door to Peter Taltavul's Tavern and began a drinking spree with several coachmen who were waiting to drive their employers home. Some time between 9 and 10 P.M., Parker was actually standing only a few feet from John Wilkes Booth, who came into Taltavul's and ordered a bottle of whiskey at the bar before going up to the box to assassinate the President. Parker apparently did not even hear of the murder of the Chief Executive he was supposed to have been guarding until he staggered into a police station after midnight, dragging a prostitute named Lizzie Williams, whom he had arrested because she refused to grant him her favors without payment. Not only was he never tried, there is no record of his ever being questioned about his dereliction of duty!

Parker remained on the force for three years after President Lincoln's death and was in constant trouble because of his drinking. In 1868 he simply disappeared. There is no existing record of him after that date. There is not even a record of his death.

Parker was 35 years old in 1865, when Lincoln was shot. He would have been 60 in 1890, the time of this story, if he had lived.

Taltavul's Tavern, which was once a well-known Washington resort, closed its doors very soon after the assassination. Pictures of it still exist. It was directly adjacent to Ford's Theater.

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One of the great crime short-shorts of our time . . . and one that should be reprinted just before November in every election year.

As we once wrote about this story, we can only ask that you take its underlying theme seriously to heart. It concerns you and your children and your children's children. If you are one of the guilty ones, let the last few paragraphs jolt you out of your complacency or inertia.

TOWN WANTED

by FREDRIC BROWN

ON MY WAY IN, I LOOKED INTO THE back room. The boys were there. Alderman Higgins had a pile of blue chips in front of him and was trying to keep his greasy little mug from looking sap-happy.

Lieutenant Grange was there too. He was half tight. He had beer spots on the front of his blue uniform shirt. His hands shook when he picked up the stein.

The alderman looked up and said, "Hi, Jimmy. How's tricks?"

I gave him a grin and went on upstairs. I pushed on into the boss's office without knocking.

He looked at me sort of queerly. "Everything go okay?"

"They'll find him when the lake dries up," I told him. "We won't be around then."

"You covered all the angles, Jimmy?"

"All what angles?" I asked him. "Nobody's going to investigate. A guy won't pay his protection, and Annie Doesn't Live Here Any More. Now the rest of them will lay it on the line."

The boss took out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat off his bald spot. You could see the guy was squeamish. That's no way to handle things. It would be different, I figured, when I took over.

I eased down and lighted a cigarette. "Listen," I said. "This town is worth twice the take we're getting. Who do we move in on next?"

"We're letting it ride a while, Jimmy. Things are hot."

I got up and started for the door.

He said softly, "Sit down, Jimmy."

I didn't, but I went back and stood in front of him.

"Well?" I asked.

"About the boys you've lined up to buck me, Jimmy. When do you think you're going to take over?"

I guess I'd underestimated him. You can't run the rackets and not be hep.

I sat down. "I don't get you, boss," I stalled. "What's on your mind?"

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"Let's settle this, Jimmy," he said. There were beads of sweat on his bald spot again and he wiped it off. I kept my yap shut and looked at him. It was his move.

"You're a good guy, Jimmy," he went on. "You've been a big help to me."

There wasn't any malarkey in that. But he was just winding up and I sat back and waited to see what he was going to pitch.

"But six months ago I saw it couldn't last, Jimmy. You got big ideas. This burg isn't large enough for you to stay in second spot. Right?"

I still waited for him to go on.

"You think you've bought four of the boys. You've only got two. The other two leveled with me. They're set to gum your works."

That was bad listening. He *did* know; four was right. And I didn't know which two ratted. All right, I thought, this is the showdown.

"Go on," I said. "I'm listening."

"You're too ambitious for me, Jimmy. I was satisfied to run the slot machines and the joints. Maybe just a little on the protection societies. You want to run the town. You want to collect the taxes. And your trigger finger's too jittery for me, Jimmy. I don't like killing, except when I have to."

"Lay off the character reading," I told him. "You've called the shots. Add it up."

"You could kill me now, maybe. But you wouldn't get away with it. And you're too smart, Jimmy, to stick your neck out unless it's going to get you something. I'm counting on that. I'm ready for you. You wouldn't get out of here alive. If you did, you'd have to blow. And if you blow, what's it get you?"

I walked over to the window and looked out. He wouldn't draw on me, I knew. Hell, why should he? He held the cards; I could see that now. He'd wised up a little too soon for me.

"You've been a big help, Jimmy," he went on. "I want to break fair with you. In the last year I've made more dough than I'd have made without you. I want you to leave. But I'll give you a stake. Pick a town of your own and work it. Leave me this one."

I kept looking out the window. I knew why he wouldn't bump me. There'd been too many killings; the cops were beginning to take it on the chin. The boss wanted to pull in his horns.

And from his point of view I could see it all right. He could even drop the protectives. The slots, the joints, the semi-legit stuff paid enough to suit him. He'd rather play safe for a small take. I'm not that way.

I turned and faced him. After all, why not another town? I could do it, if I picked one that was ripe.

"How much?" I asked him.

"Ten grand," he said.

And that was that.

You can see now why I'm in Miami. I figured I could use a vacation before I picked out a spot. A swell suite, overlooking the sea. Women, parties, roulette and all that. You can make a

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big splash here if you're willing to spend a few grand.

But I'm getting restless. I'd rather see it coming in.

I know how I'll start, when I've picked my town. I'll take a tavern for a front. Then I find out which politicians are on the auction block. I'll see that the others go — money can swing that. Then I bring in torpedoes and start to work.

Coin machines are the quickest dough. You pyramid that into bookie joints, sporting houses, and the rest; and when you're strong enough, the protective societies — where the merchants pay you to let them alone. That's the big dough racket, if you're not squeamish. It's big dough because you don't have to put in anything for what you take out.

If you know the angles and work it so you don't have to start liquidating the opposition until you've got control, it's a cinch. And I know the angles.

Plenty of towns would do, but some are easier than others. If you pick one that's ripe, it goes quicker, and if you can buy enough of the boys in office, you won't have to force the others out.

I'm looking them over. I'm tired of loafing.

How's your town? I can tell if you answer me a question. Last time there was an election, did you really read up both sides of things, with the idea of keeping things on the up and up? Or did you go for the guy with the biggest posters?

Huh? You say you didn't even get to the polls at all?

Pal, that's just the town I'm looking for.

I'll be seeing you.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **MICHAEL INNES**

TITLE: ***The Heritage Portrait***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Inspector Appleby

LOCALE: London and environs

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *At the unveiling of Lord Heritage's portrait, something funny happened — and yet it wasn't funny. In fact, it was spectacularly outrageous — and that was only the beginning . . .*

LADY APPLEBY CAME INTO HER HUSband's study, slipped off her coat, and sat down. "I'll have a drink," she said.

Appleby poured sherry without comment. Judith didn't often take it into her head to drink before dinner. For some seconds they sipped in silence. "Frightfully boring?" he asked.

"No, not boring. Unexpectedly exhausting, though." She paused, frowning at her glass. "I think you ought to have been there."

"Nonsense." Appleby's tone was unnecessarily decisive. Having enjoyed a cosy afternoon with a novel, he was feeling slightly guilty. "For one thing, I just haven't your zest for artistic occasions. For another, I scarcely knew his late lordship, and I've never set eyes on Littlefair, and I'm not a member of the Confectioners' Company, or whatever it is."

"Comfits, not confectionery. The Comfiters. Lord Heritage was their Master. That's why Lady Heritage was presenting them with Littlefair's portrait of her late husband. Or thought she was."

"What's that?" Appleby looked up sharply. Judith wasn't given to idle talk.

"I repeat, John, you ought to have been there. There was—well, I suppose it was a kind of joke. It could be made to sound screamingly funny. Probably it will be. But it wasn't. It was rather horrible. That's why I'm drinking some sherry."

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"Drink some more."

Judith Appleby shook her head. "No. But I'll tell you what happened."

Appleby tossed his novel aside. "Is it a police affair?"

"Lord, yes. That faithful Inspector of yours—the puff-puff man—"

"Chugg?"

"Yes, Chugg. He was on the spot before I came away. So you'll be hearing about it. This is just a preliminary note by an unskilled eyewitness."

Appleby finished his sherry, and with a gesture of mild resolution put the stopper back in the decanter. "Go ahead," he said.

"The Comfiters aren't one of the large livery companies. But they have a splendid hall, and the presentation was to take place in that. The Comfiters themselves, and their wives—" Judith broke off. "How funny! Isn't there a comfit-maker's wife somewhere in Shakespeare?"

"Undoubtedly there is." Appleby replied briskly but not impatiently. "You were saying, I think, that these grand people were up on the dais?"

"Yes—along with Lady Heritage and Jethro Littlefair and some particularly important-looking outsiders. The Comfiters have the most gorgeous robes. A sort of cerise—"

"And the body of the hall?"

"It was nearly filled. Goodness knows who they all were, or why they had tagged along."

"Quite so."

"I was in the front row, so I had a lovely view. The portrait was on a large, rather bogus-looking easel behind the bigwigs. It was draped in crimson velvet, and there was an enormous velvet rope and tassel waiting to be pulled. The whole effect was nicely accommodated, I thought, to Jethro Littlefair's later and most Corinthian style. You could see he was as pleased as Punch at the way they were doing him proud. Beaming behind his great woolly beard."

"You mean the blessed thing was to be unveiled?"

"Yes. It's a habit that's spread quite a lot. Lady Heritage, the generous donor, was to pull the tassel. And after a lot of speechifying about the deceased peer's services to the universe at large, she did pull—good and hard. The crimson stuff came away without a hitch, and people began to clap—which is the thing to do at such moments, it seems. Littlefair looked as if he was wondering whether to rise and make a bow. He needn't have worried. The clapping stopped dead. What was on the easel wasn't Lord Heritage."

"I see." Appleby made no attempt to sound astounded. "But was it a Littlefair?"

"Certainly it was a Littlefair. I knew it quite well—though I was probably the only person there, besides Littlefair himself, who did. It was a big oil which he did ages ago—in fact, when he was still a painter. Really powerful. Mammon."

"Mammon?" This time Appleby was frankly startled.

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"Yes. Milton's Mammon, you might say. The least erected Spirit that fell from Heaven. A lot of the Comfiters on the dais couldn't get a proper view, and they were completely bewildered by the cries of protest that came from down below. There was some more or less hysterical laughter as well. Littlefair was the first person to budge—but not in a manner at all to his credit. In fact, he lost his head, and bolted from the hall, gibbering."

"And Lady Heritage?"

"She just sat down. It wasn't nice for her."

"It was a damnable outrage!"

"Yes." Judith nodded soberly. "A blackguard's joke. And bewildering. I mean that it was funny, and yet it wasn't. I suppose one had violently to repress in oneself a purely wanton glee—and that's what made it exhausting, as I said. The chief Comfiter—Heritage's successor as Master—did quite well. He looked as if he was just escaping apoplexy. But he got up and said the right things—apologizing on behalf of the Honourable Company of Comfiters to Lady Heritage and their other guests. He didn't mention Littlefair, which was natural enough. Then he asked us to remain in our places while he conferred with some of his colleagues. I suppose he had a notion the police might want to question everybody. And your Chugg, as I said, was there in no time. After that we were told to go away, and vague noises were made about the ceremony taking place on a later occasion. So we went. And all London—or all that sort of London—is gossiping about the thing now."

Appleby nodded. "I bet it is—and thinking up all sorts of explanations. What's yours?"

Judith considered. "It was a demonstration—but against whom or what? It might be against Lord Heritage. Any big financier can be screamed about as the modern Mammon, I suppose. But, equally, it might be a demonstration against Littlefair. His Mammon was good *avant-garde* stuff in its days; and his Heritage is no doubt just another dreary official portrait. Lord Heritage, you see, wasn't a real connoisseur. He was simply another rich man, ministering to his own self-importance by collecting frightfully valuable things. He just wouldn't know that Littlefair had long since ceased to be much good. So the stroke was quite mordant, if directed against Littlefair himself. Then again, the thing may scarcely have been conceived in terms of personalities at all. There's the silly side of the surrealist movement, just as there was of dadaism and futurism. Doing something spectacularly outrageous on the artistic front, just for its own sake."

"Un acte gratuit." Appleby offered this is a trifle vaguely. "What sort of chap is this Littlefair?"

"Frightfully egocentric and vain. He'll certainly be convinced that he was the sole intended victim of the

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plot, and the spectacle of his wounded sensibility will be extremely harrowing. But he'll recover."

"Do you think—" Appleby broke off as a telephone rang in the room. He walked to his desk, picked up the instrument, and after a few words listened almost in silence. "Thank you, Chugg," he said eventually. "I'll come now." When he had finished the call, he turned to his wife. "You were wrong," he said.

"About Littlefair?"

Appleby nodded. "Yes. He won't have a chance to recover. He's dead."

Littlefair's house was very much that of a successful man. In fact, everything was on the showy side, and Appleby mounted to a large studio on the top floor by staircases so thickly carpeted that the climb felt more fatiguing than it needed to be. Inspector Chugg, himself brooding and inactive, was watching subordinates photographing the body.

Appleby took his own glance at the dead man. Littlefair was dressed in formal morning clothes, but had emphasized his profession by putting on an enormous bottle-green bow tie. His beard had been so beautifully groomed that it seemed a great shame that it was now soaked in blood.

Appleby asked the question that always came to him on such occasions. "Wife and kids?"

"A wife somewhere about London. No children. A mistress—name of Julia Parnaby—downstairs now." Chugg spoke darkly. A career necessarily exposing him to much that was unedifying had never impaired his simple moral feelings. "You wouldn't think a man could live openly like that and carry on a profession at the level he did."

Appleby shook his head. "Highly respectable persons will take a lot from an artist. They regard marital infidelity as authenticating the type . . . Just what happened here?"

"After the fiasco at the Comfiters, Littlefair seems to have come straight home in a taxi. He burst in upon the Parnaby woman and poured out what had happened. She says he was in a great state, but didn't suggest anything as bad as sheer desperation. Then a fellow called Ozanne arrived. He was Lord Heritage's brother-in-law, and he had come straight on from Comfiter's Hall. He thought there was just a chance that the real portrait might still be here in this studio. Finding Littlefair still very upset, he tried to calm him down. But his efforts, according to Miss Parnaby, had just the opposite effect. Littlefair kept on saying he was the victim of a vile persecution. And then it seems that something was said about Littlefair's wife—who now, as I've told you, has a separate establishment."

Appleby frowned. "Said by whom?"

"Ozanne wasn't clear. But presently Littlefair was raving against Mrs. Littlefair, and saying that she was responsible for the whole thing.

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Miss Parnaby rather egged him on to this, as one can imagine she would. Ozanne maintained that this notion was absurd, or at least highly improbable. But that didn't help."

"It wouldn't. When a man's in the state you describe Littlefair as having got into, rational persuasion is more often than not merely aggravating. This chap Ozanne should simply have cleared out."

Chugg nodded. "He did—quite soon. But not before Littlefair had taken himself up to this studio, declaring that the humiliation was too much for his delicate feelings, and that he just couldn't take it."

"They simply let him go?"

"It seems so. Ozanne stayed on with Miss Parnaby for a few minutes, and appears vaguely to have suggested calling in a doctor. Then he went away, and the lady put in five minutes having a good cry. After that she came up to the studio, and found Littlefair dead." Chugg paused. "All the appearances of suicide."

"I see." Appleby looked thoughtfully at his subordinate. "And your own mind inclines that way?"

"It's much too soon to incline one way or the other." Chugg sounded reproachful. "Littlefair was shot through the mouth. The revolver, which lay beside him, has his fingerprints—and in what appears to be quite a plausible position. He was found on his back, which may account for an ugly bruise on his head. But it looks as if the medical people aren't going to be too sure. He may have been stunned first, and then shot."

"Access?"

Chugg pointed to the window. "Fire escape. It drops straight down a blank wall into a deserted yard. Half London could have been involved—and nobody any the wiser."

Appleby inspected the studio thoroughly. It certainly didn't contain the missing portrait of Lord Heritage. On the other hand, there was a good deal of Littlefair's earlier work. It hadn't perhaps, in spite of its merit, ever found a very ready market. Or possibly it was part of the painter's vanity that he had been unwilling to part with some of his best things. And Miss Parnaby, it seemed, vouched for the fact that the "Mammon" had been among these. She had, in fact, seen it in the studio only the week before. Since then, anybody could have slipped up the fire escape and made off with it. The household appeared to be one entirely negligent in matters of security.

Presently Appleby went downstairs to interview the lady himself. He was not favorably impressed. Julia Parnaby had unbounded beauty and very sufficient poise. You would have supposed that she was received in the best society every day. But she suggested a hard, calculating, and rather empty woman. Appleby felt that he would have had a readier sympathy for a young person more obviously elevated from some hum-

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ble walk of life. He didn't think she was one who would do anything very staggering at the prompting, say, of jealousy. But she clearly liked luxury and could have made do, very nicely, with absolute opulence. Simple greed might carry her quite a long way.

Appleby went over the ground Chugg had already covered. Miss Parnaby, who seemed to take it as a tribute to her own somewhat equivocal position that she was being questioned by so high an officer of the Metropolitan Police, answered with well-bred calm. Littlefair's death might have been a severe blow to her, but she gave no indication of being knocked out by it.

"I believe, Miss Parnaby, that you think it possible that Mrs. Littlefair may have been responsible for the trick with the painting?"

"Nothing seems more likely."

"Why? What sort of woman is she? How would you describe her?"

"Dowdy and queer." The reply came promptly. "She was envious of Jethro's success after he and I found each other." Julia Parnaby contrived to give to this description of her *liaison* the suggestion of some inescapable decree of fate. "She was just an art student, you know—nothing more."

Appleby refrained from suggesting that Littlefair had presumably once been just that too. "She remained," he asked, "interested in her husband's work, even after the —um—separation?"

"Yes—but only in the vilest way. She maintained that Jethro had ruined himself as a painter, that he had—had prostituted his art." Understandably, perhaps, Miss Parnaby had stumbled slightly over this expression. "She has been quite fanatical about it. To listen to her, you'd think she was mad."

"You are on speaking terms with the lady? She hasn't been fanatical about her husband's career in its more personal aspect?"

"She doesn't blame *me*, if that's what you mean. She regards me not as a cause but as a symptom." And Miss Parnaby looked at Appleby with a hard smile, as if taking satisfaction in utterance of this large candor. "She says that a painter who goes soft at the center—as she declares Jethro to have done—would quite naturally pick up a person like myself. I didn't occasion the rot. I'm just a minor consequence. Her bitterness has been against Jethro, not me. She'd have done anything—anything—to make a devastating public commentary on what she regarded as his degeneration. That's why I think it was her today."

"But she wouldn't follow it up by murder?"

This time Miss Parnaby seemed really discomposed. "I don't know what you mean, Sir John."

"I must tell you, then, that it's by no means certain that your—that Mr. Littlefair took his own life. The appearances suggest it. But they may have been contrived."

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"She wouldn't have done that. She wouldn't have killed Jethro."

"Hasn't it been said, Miss Parnaby, that hell has no fury like a woman scorned?" Appleby produced this banal quotation—or misquotation—unblushingly.

"He didn't scorn her. She scorned him."

"I see." Appleby wasn't at all sure that this reply really met the point. But he was coming to feel that the unpleasing Miss Parnaby owned a certain clarity of mind. He tried one more question. "You weren't struck by anything more about Mr. Littlefair before he went up to his studio? There was this agitation and so forth, but was there anything else?"

"Jethro seemed to be trying to remember something—or to work something out. But only with part of his mind." Miss Parnaby paused, as if feeling that this required better definition. "When you're doing a crossword, and something very urgent and absorbing interrupts you, you may still go on hunting for a clue—without really knowing that you are. You recognize what I mean?"

"Yes, I do." Again Appleby was rather impressed.

"Well, it was like that. Jethro was in this terrible state over what had happened at Comfiters' Hall. In a way, of course, he was putting on an act about it. All artists are like that."

"Many are."

"And at the same time it was quite a genuine brainstorm. But his mind was still groping after something—something that would probably have popped up when he calmed down. Does that make any sense?"

Appleby reached for his hat. "At least," he said, "it gives food for thought. Good afternoon."

When Appleby reached the late Lord Heritage's mansion, it was to find Lady Heritage drinking tea in the company of a middle-aged man of military appearance, whom she introduced as her brother, Charles Ozanne. Lady Heritage still seemed dazed by her experience that afternoon, and she received the news of Littlefair's death merely with a helpless gesture and a sigh. But her brother swore softly, and then took a rapid turn across the room as if to compose himself. "I ought to have gone after him," he said as he came back.

"But surely, Charles, that's just what you did do?"

Ozanne glanced at his sister impatiently. "Yes, yes—I went to Littlefair's house, as you know. But I ought to have followed him up to his studio. He didn't look right. In fact, he looked damned wrong. Kind of look I've seen before."

Appleby appeared mildly interested. "In what circumstances Mr. Ozanne?"

"Trenches. Breaking point. Moments, you know, when it seemed wise to get a subaltern's service re-

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volver away from him. But one gets old. And forgets." Ozanne had a staccato manner of speaking. "And my mind was taken up with the bloody picture."

"I don't think you should speak of poor Rupert's portrait in that way." Lady Heritage was reproachful but not angry. "It was very nice, and a great solace to me after my husband's death." She had turned to Appleby. "Rupert died suddenly, you know, only a few days after Mr. Littlefair finished his painting. I had it hung in my bedroom at once. And now I wish very much that I hadn't offered it to those shockingly careless Comfiters."

"There certainly appears to have been negligence." Appleby was unobtrusively tactful. "Did you send the canvas directly to the Comfiters' Hall?"

"No, Sir John. It went back to Littlefair, because he wasn't satisfied about the varnish. And he had it delivered yesterday afternoon."

"And some firm that does that sort of job carried out the curtaining-business this morning." Ozanne offered this information. "After that the hall was left deserted, and this valuable picture quite unguarded. Incredible, eh? Asking for monkey tricks. And now Littlefair takes the offensive joke to heart, and blows his brains out. Poor show."

Appleby concurred. "I suppose," he then said to Lady Heritage, "there was nothing about the portrait of your late husband that might be wounding to any individual, or arouse resentment?"

"Certainly not. It was a very nice portrait, very homely and informal, with Rupert in his purple velvet smoking-jacket, smoking a cigar, and with one or two things from his collection around him. There was a window, too—a wonderfully clever idea, I thought—with several of the Heritage tankers coming up an estuary, and the Heritage refinery in the background. It was all in beautiful taste. And so many pretty colors."

"You'll agree, I'm sure, that my sister makes it sound enchanting." Ozanne's ironical tone indicated that in artistic matters he owned a sophistication of which Lady Heritage was utterly innocent. "It would have looked well, hung beside some of my brother-in-law's other things: the Velasquez Infanta, for instance, or the self-portrait of Cezanne."

Appleby was visibly impressed. "I know that Lord Heritage's collection was notable. I believe it goes to the nation?"

Ozanne nodded. "With one or two exceptions, yes. This portrait by Littlefair, of course, was my sister's property, and not involved. We're having a little trouble over valuation for probate, and so on. That's why I've moved in."

"Charles is very kindly spending some months with me," Lady Heritage explained. "Of course the whole collection has been very carefully catalogued as it grew, and we know exactly what Rupert paid for *nearly*

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everything. But it seems there are all sorts of difficult questions just the same."

"I'm sure there are." Appleby showed a proper sympathy for the burdens that go along with great wealth. "Did the Comfiters ask especially for this particular portrait, Lady Heritage?"

"Oh, no. I don't think they knew about it. It had never, of course, been exhibited. But they asked for *some* portrait of Rupert—naturally, there have been a great many—to hang in their beautiful hall. And—as the Master wrote—in a *prominent* position."

"Naturally. And you decided on the Littlefair yourself? Did they then send an expert to look at it?"

"Dear me, no. The Master came to see it himself, along with Lord Godlet who owns the multiple stores, and Sir James Georgano who makes all the wireless sets. Of course they were delighted. Lord Godlet is a great authority. He bought something extremely important only the other day. By one of those Italians whom people admire so much."

"In fact, he bought the Fournier Leonardo." Ozanne favored Appleby with a rather wolfish grin. "You could hardly have higher credentials than that."

Appleby nodded. "I've seen that Leonardo. But I wish I'd seen Jethro Littlefair's Lord Heritage."

Ozanne's grin broadened. "I'm afraid," he said, "you never will."

When Appleby got home he found his wife entertaining Mr. Hildebert Braunkopf. No doubt the art dealer had been summoned. It was like Judith to guess that the particular sort of information in which he abounded might be required. At the moment she was resisting, without much difficulty, the suggestion that she should buy one of the three Littlefairs which Braunkopf was fortunate enough to have in his gallery. He now turned enthusiastically to his host.

"Three hundred kinnies, my goot Sir John Abbleby, for a puttikler early mature masterpiece of this now irreplacable dead painter."

"My dear fellow, I haven't got the money."

"Or two-seven-five, quiet transaction, no publicities, one-pount notes."

"Look here, Braunkopf, my wife and I are meaning to drop in on you later this week and pick up a drawing or two at a reasonable price. But I certainly don't want to buy anything by Littlefair. All I want is some information about him. He tried to get you to place things from time to time?"

"Certainly, Sir John. That marches without speaking. All the best most established high reputatious artists —"

"Quite so. Did he ever say anything about his commission for Lord Heritage?"

"But yes. It was to be exhibited at Burlington House, he said, and make great sensations in the worlt of art.

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When Lady Heritage decided to keep it unexhibited, Littlefair was down in the damps."

"In the damps, was he? And when she decided on the presentation to the Comfiters?"

"Littlefair was quite applauded up again."

Not unnaturally, Appleby took a moment to interpret this. "Did you gather there was anything out of the way about the painting?"

Braunkopf nodded. "There was somethings. Perhaps a new formula for composings of an official portrait, yes?"

"I see. Now, there's something else. Did you ever have any dealings with Lord Heritage?"

Mr. Braunkopf could be seen to hesitate. No doubt vanity prompted him to declare that he was perpetually transacting business with all the established high reputatious collectors of Europe. But something in Appleby's eye constrained him to veracity. "Not directly, my goot Sir John. Many the largest most important buyers approach the market only through agents."

"Quite so. And sometimes highly confidential agents? While an important negotiation is going on, it might be difficult to know who was acting for whom?"

"That is so. But most always I know, Sir John, I have big intelligence all that side the great worlt of art."

"I know you have. Could you find out whom Heritage was employing on anything that he wanted treated as more or less top secret?"

Braunkopf made a gesture indicating large confidence. "Two-three hours, Sir John."

"I want the fellow, whoever he is, on that mat." And Appleby pointed to the hearth rug. "I expect you know enough about almost anybody in the trade, my dear Braunkopf, to make them feel it healthy to pay any little call you suggest."

"But certainly." Braunkopf received this ambiguous testimonial with obvious gratification. "Only that takes larger time—yes?" He considered. "Tomorrow evening—at six."

Appleby sought out Mrs. Littlefair the next morning, and found her in an unassuming terrace house in a dull suburb. It didn't appear that she had been allowed much share in the prosperity attending her late husband's more recent labors. Perhaps she had been conscientiously opposed to accepting any of the fruits of so debased an art.

"Must I really answer more questions?" Mrs. Littlefair who was handsome in a forbidding way, looked Appleby straight in the eye.

"You know that your men were here yesterday evening, and even obtained my permission to search the house? I'd have thought that was about enough."

"I certainly don't want to attempt anything in the nature of an interrogation. It's rather your opinion that I seek." As he made this pacific

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speech, Appleby let his glance wander round Mrs. Littlefair's environment. It was austere; there was nothing in the room that Hildebert Braunkopf would have judged worth twopence; but there was an impression, nevertheless, of an absolute perfection of taste. It did seem conceivable that the spectacle of her husband accommodating himself to the world of the Heritages might drive this woman to some act of bizarre fanaticism. "I wonder what you think about the woman your husband was living with?"

"I don't. There isn't really a person there to think about. Julia Parnaby has good looks, and nothing else. And one can't *think* about good looks."

"If she felt any reason to suppose that Jethro Littlefair was going to throw her over, do you think she might have done something drastic?"

"Certainly not. She would simply have sat back and worked out the stiffest terms she could demand."

"You would call her mercenary?"

"She'd do a good deal for hard cash."

Appleby smiled. "Unfortunately," he said, "that's true of so many of us."

"It's not true of me."

This had come from the lady like a flash. And Appleby nodded soberly. "I believe that's so. You, Mrs. Littlefair, conduct your life on other principles."

It hadn't, Appleby thought, been a very rewarding expedition. He was standing in Mrs. Littlefair's narrow hall and preparing to take his leave. But his eye was still active. There was a telephone on a small table, and in addition to the directory there were five or six smaller volumes. One was the handbook of a motoring organization. "You own a car?" Appleby asked.

Mrs. Littlefair appeared surprised. "Yes, a very old one."

"Awkward—isn't it?—a house in a row like this. No garage."

"Yes. But I have the use of a shed in the next road."

"I see. Did those tiresome police who visited you yesterday search that?"

"They did not. They didn't inquire about it."

"Ah," Appleby put a certain grimness into this. "Would you mind walking round there with me now, Mrs. Littlefair?"

"Not in the slightest." But Mrs. Littlefair's looks, Appleby thought, belied her words. She might have been suddenly frightened. Or she might have just been out of patience and very angry.

The shed was a ramshackle affair—decidedly not what is called a private lock-up. But then the car it sheltered was ramshackle too, and nobody could conceivably be prompted to make off with it. There was a pile of sacking and old cardboard boxes at the back. And it was behind these that Appleby found the portrait.

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The canvas had been slashed to ribbons, and bits were missing. But it was unquestionably Jethro Littlefair's ill-starred Lord Heritage. There were the tankers coming up the estuary. One could even distinguish the cigar. When Charles Ozanne declared that Appleby would never see the portrait, he had been wrong.

Mrs. Littlefair was very pale. But she remained true to her principles. She touched the ripped surface of the painting, and then drew back in revulsion, as if the very texture was physically intolerable to her. "Horrible," she said, and fainted.

On the following evening Hildebert Braunkopf arrived punctually with a man named Carabine. He also brought a large portfolio of drawings; and with these he withdrew to seek Judith Appleby as soon as he had handed over the late Lord Heritage's agent to Appleby himself.

Carabine was scarcely a willing guest. But, although sullen and evasive, there was a good deal which he realized he must own up. In forming the Heritage collection, he maintained, his employer had relished secrecy and devious courses. Lord Heritage had belonged essentially to big business—the very biggest business—and it had been second nature to him to enjoy discomfiting a rival by coming out suddenly with this or that *fait accompli*. And of course the world of art-dealing had its own peculiar standards and conventions. Some of them might look a bit queer to an outsider, but he, Carabine, had certainly done nothing that wasn't quite the proper thing.

"I suppose," Appleby asked, "that you fixed up the commission with Littlefair?"

"Yes."

"That was just one of the jobs for which you received a regular salary from Lord Heritage?"

"Of course I had a salary."

"Nevertheless, you no doubt got Littlefair the job on the condition that he let you have twenty per cent of it back as a rake-off?"

"Only fifteen per cent. That's very usual and moderate."

"Perhaps it is, Mr. Carabine. But did Lord Heritage know?"

"No—I suppose he didn't."

"I understand that Mr. Ozanne, Lady Heritage's brother, has now taken charge of Lord Heritage's affairs. What would have happened if Littlefair had for any reason felt prompted to speak up about that rake-off? Mr. Ozanne would probably have investigated some other of your dealings for his late brother-in-law?"

Carabine moistened his lips nervously. "Perhaps."

"And Lord Heritage's fondness for secrecy and so forth gave you a good deal of scope—shall we say to advance your own monetary interests in ways unknown to him? It is very much in your interest, then, that there should be no inquiry?"

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"Naturally one doesn't want a lot of fuss."

"Moreover it would be your impulse to keep mum if you came upon funny business by anybody else, since one exposure might lead to another?"

Carabine took a moment to consider this. "You put it all deuced unfairly," he said.

"Never mind how I put it. Just reflect that Littlefair is dead—and that the police are by no means satisfied as to how he died. That, Mr. Carabine, takes this affair quite outside your comfortable territory as a common-or-garden shady person. That being so, I wonder if you have anything more to say?"

Reluctantly, Carabine admitted that he had.

It was half an hour later that Appleby rejoined his wife. Rather to his surprise, she was alone. "Hullo," he said, "what's happened to Braunkopf? Has he sold you the lot?"

Judith shook her head. "He's gone after higher game. Lady Heritage."

"She doesn't know the top of a painting from the bottom. And she'll certainly be off the whole subject at the moment. I don't know why she should even agree to see him."

"Braunkopf is very enterprising. He's made an appointment with her. He had a sort of lever."

"A lever?"

"This job he's just done for you: digging out Carabine's association with her husband."

Appleby jumped to his feet. "Braunkopf's told her I've got on to that?" He strode across the room to the telephone.

"My dear John, what's wrong?"

"Action stations, Judith! Get out the car."

Inspector Chugg was waiting on Westminster Bridge. He jumped in before Appleby had come to a stop. "A Mercedes," he said. "And it has an hour's start for the coast. We've got everything out, sir. But it's always tricky at night. A driver who knows the country really well might just get through."

"Get through to where, Inspector?" Judith, who was sitting beside her husband in front, turned round. "Can't you have something uncomfortable waiting at the other end?"

"The other end is a motor cruiser, your ladyship. But we don't know just where she's lying. The difficulty's there." Chugg paused, fiddling with a mechanism beside him. "Your short-wave's all correct, sir."

Judith said no more. Even the fact that this was John's private car hardly made her presence very regular. They swept through South London in the early darkness and out along one of the arterial roads. Voices murmured in the back as messages came in from all over the southern counties. Judith got the impression that two or three times the Mercedes had been spotted, but on no occasion by police who were in a position to give immediate chase.

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Once they halted for a rapid consultation over a map. When they went on, it was as if John had made some confident guess. She remembered that he had got to know the south coast pretty well during the war. She knew that he and Chugg were directing and coordinating a vast search. Suddenly it came to her that perhaps they were going to do something more. Perhaps they were themselves going to be in at the death—if it came to a death.

A long time seemed to pass. Judith dozed, and woke up. She saw they had reached the sea—or rather they had reached a cliff road, high above it. There was an alarming moment when their headlights appeared to reveal nothing but an abyss before them. Then they swung abruptly to the right, and Judith realized that they were rounding a deep cove.

At the next bend the windscreen took a sudden dangerous lunge at her face. John had brought the car to a dead stop. There was another car—stationary and without lights—directly in front of them. Chugg gave a shout—it might have been of excitement or of recognition—and in a moment the two men were out and running. Judith followed.

And then it all happened in seconds—or so it seemed to her afterward. There was dark water far below, and from somewhere out on its invisible surface the brief flash of a signal. There was a crazy path down the face of the cliff, and there was a figure running even more crazily down it, caught every now and then in the beam of Chugg's powerful torch. The figure was staggering under some obscure but crippling burden, and the two pursuers gained rapidly as Judith watched. Chugg was shouting—a summons, a warning—when his voice was drowned by a single ghastly scream. The fugitive had slipped, recovered, slipped again, dropped the burden in a final effort to regain balance, and then plunged headlong down the face of the cliff.

They drove back to London in the very early morning. Judith felt numb. "A better death than being hanged," she said, and then tapped the stout wooden box beside her. "John, what is it, anyway?"

"It's the Grandoni Apollo."

"Impossible!"

"One of the finest Greek bronze heads ever discovered. And, as you know, it disappeared a couple of centuries ago. There have been plenty of copies and engravings to tell one what it was like. But the head itself had vanished—until Carabine found it and bought it on the quiet for Heritage. Then Heritage hit on the notion of the portrait. Cigar, tankers, refinery, an Old Master or two—*and* the Grandoni Apollo. Think of the sensation when the thing was recognized at the Royal Academy exhibition. But Heritage died. And Lady Heritage, having no notion of what was afoot, simply shoved the portrait into her bedroom. And there

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it was presently seen by her brother Charles Ozanne, who had some artistic cultivation. He tumbled to the truth, rummaged round, and found the actual Apollo."

"If he hadn't, he'd be alive today." Judith shivered.

"Quite so. Well, there was a vast temptation to steal the bronze. Because of Heritage's close ways, there was a chance that his estate could be wound up without this big purchase ever coming to light—and particularly, of course, if Ozanne himself moved in and negotiated the tricky corners. He decided to take the risk. And all went well—until his sister decided to give the portrait to the Comfiters. Immediately it was unveiled, and glimpsed by a competent art historian, Ozanne was done for. And Littlefair was also a risk. He may not have been more than vaguely aware of the importance of the Apollo. But if the portrait simply vanished unaccountably, he might begin groping for a reason—and find it. Actually, as we know, he very nearly caught on in the last fifteen minutes of his life."

"So the Mammon business *wasn't* any sort of demonstration."

"It was designed by Ozanne to look like one—and so to obscure the practical motive involved. It was also neatly calculated to throw Littlefair into a state of mind—later cleverly intensified by Ozanne—in which suicide would seem plausible. Ozanne was a little too quick to agree with the suicide theory, I noticed."

"And he tried to blame it all, very much as a demonstration, on Littlefair's wife?"

"Exactly. And by slashing the canvas to ribbons before planting it in her shed, he was able to remove the vital area showing the Apollo. The only remaining danger was Carabine. But it was entirely in Carabine's interest to remain quiet, and Ozanne had no reason to suppose that we should ever hear of him. But when Braunkopf went off and prattled to Lady Heritage, she naturally passed on his talk to her brother. The game was up, and Ozanne made his last move—the move that ended on that nasty bit of cliff."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ELLERY QUEEN**

TITLE: ***"My Queer Dean!"***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVES: Ellery Queen, mystery writer, and his father, Inspector Queen

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *David C. Cooke, in his* BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR — 1954, *wrote that "My Queer Dean!" was his "favorite Queen short-short." Surely no Q.B.I. case gave us more pleasure to plot and write.*

THE QUEERNESS OF MATTHEW ARnold Hope, beloved teacher of Ellery's Harvard youth and lately dean of liberal arts in a New York university, is legendary.

The story is told, for instance, of baffled students taking Dr. Hope's Shakespeare course for the first time. "History advises us that Richard II died peacefully at Pontefract, probably of pneumonia," Dr. Hope scolds. "But what does Shakespeare say, Act V, Scene V? That Exton struck him down," and here the famous authority on Elizabethan literature will pause for emphasis, "with a blushing crow!"

Imaginative sophmores have been known to suffer nightmares as a result of this remark. Older heads nod intelligently, of course, knowing that Dr. Hope meant merely to say — in fact, thought he was saying — "a crushing blow."

The good dean's unconscious spoonerisms, like the sayings of Miss Parker and Mr. Goldwyn, are reverently preserved by aficionados, among whom Ellery counts himself a charter member. It is Ellery who has saved for posterity that deathless pronouncement of Dr. Hope's to a freshman class in English composition: "All those who persist in befouling their theme papers with cant and other low expressions not in good usage are warned for the last time: Refine your style or be exiled from this course with the rest of the vanished Bulgarians!"

But perhaps Dean Hope's greatest exploit began recently in the faculty

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lunchroom. Ellery arrived at the dean's invitation to find him waiting impatiently at one of the big round tables with three members of the English Department.

"Dr. Agnes Lovell, Professor Oswald Gorman, Mr. Morgan Naseby," the dean said rapidly. "Sit down, Ellery. Mr. Queen will have the cute frocktail and the horned beef cash — only safe edibles on the menu today, my boy — well, go fetch, young man! Are you dreaming that you're back in class?" The waiter, a harried-looking freshman, fled. "My friends, prepare for a surprise."

Dr. Lovell, a very large woman in a tight suit, said roguishly, "Wait, Matthew! Let me guess. Romance?"

"And who'd marry — in Macaulay's imperishable phrase — a living concordance?" said Professor Gorman in a voice like an abandoned winch. He was a tall freckled man with strawberry eyebrows and a quarrelsome jaw. "A real surprise, Dr. Hope, would be a departmental salary rise."

"A consummation devoutly et cetera," said Mr. Naseby, immediately blushing. He was a stout young man with an eager manner, evidently a junior in the department.

"May I have your attention?" Dean Hope looked about cautiously. "Suppose I tell you," he said in a trembling voice, "that by tonight I may have it within my power to deliver the death blow — I repeat, the death blow! — to the cockypop that Francis Bacon wrote Shakespeare's plays?"

There were two gasps, a snort, and one inquiring hum.

"Matthew!" squealed Dr. Lovell. "You'd be famous!"

"Immortal, Dean Hope," said Mr. Naseby adoringly.

"Deluded," said Professor Gorman, the snorter. "The Baconian benightedness, like the Marlowe mania, has no known specific."

"Ah, but even a fanatic," cried the dean, "would have to yield before the nature of this evidence."

"Sounds exciting, Doc," murmured Ellery. "What is it?"

"A man called at my office this morning, Ellery. He produced credentials identifying him as a London rare-book dealer, Alfred Mimms. He has in his possession, he said, a copy of the 1613 edition of *The Essaies of Sir Francis Bacon Knight the kings solliciter generall*, an item ordinarily bringing four or five hundred dollars. He claims that this copy, however, *is inscribed on the title page in Bacon's own hand to Will Shakespeare.*"

Amid the cries, Ellery asked, "Inscribed how?"

"In an encomium," quavered Dean Hope, "an encomium to Shakespeare expressing Bacon's admiration and praise for — and I quote — '*the most excellent plaies of your sweet wit and hand*'!"

"Take that!" whispered Mr. Naseby to an invisible Baconian.

"That does it," breathed Dr. Lovell.

"That would do it," said Professor Gorman, "if."

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"Did you actually see the book, Doc?" asked Ellery.

"He showed me a photostat of the title page. He'll have the original for my inspection tonight, in my office."

"And Mimms's asking price is —?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

"Proof positive that it's a forgery," said Professor Gorman rustily. "It's far too little."

"Oswald," hissed Dr. Lovell, "you creak, do you know that?"

"No, Gorman is right," said Dr. Hope. "An absurd price if the inscription is genuine, as I pointed out to Mimms. However, he had an explanation. He is acting, he said, at the instructions of the book's owner, a tax-poor British nobleman whose identity he will reveal tonight if I purchase the book. The owner, who has just found it in a castle room boarded up and forgotten for two centuries, prefers an American buyer in a confidential sale — for tax reasons, Mimms hinted. But, as a cultivated man, the owner wishes a scholar to have it rather than some ignorant Croesus. Hence the relatively low price."

"Lovely," glowed Mr. Naseby. "And so typically British."

"Isn't it," said Professor Gorman. "Terms cash, no doubt? On the line? Tonight?"

"Well, yes." The old dean took a bulging envelope from his breast pocket and eyed it ruefully. Then, with a sigh, he tucked it back. "Very nearly my life's savings . . . But I'm not altogether senile," Dr. Hope grinned. "I'm asking you to be present, Ellery — with Inspector Queen. I shall be working at my desk on administrative things into the evening. Mimms is due at eight o'clock."

"We'll be here at seven thirty," promised Ellery. "By the way, Doc, that's a lot of money to be carrying around in your pocket. Have you confided this business to anyone else?"

"No, no."

"Don't. And may I suggest that you wait behind a locked door? Don't admit Mimms — or anyone else you don't trust — until we get here. I'm afraid, Doc, I share the professor's skepticism."

"Oh, so do I," murmured the dean. "The odds on this being a swindle are, I should think, several thousand to one. But one can't help saying to oneself . . . suppose it's not?"

It was nearly half-past seven when the Queens entered the Arts Building. Some windows on the upper floors were lit up where a few evening classes were in session, and the dean's office was bright. Otherwise the building was dark.

The first thing Ellery saw as they stepped out of the self-service elevator onto the dark third floor was the door of Dean Hope's anteroom . . . wide open.

They found the old scholar crumpled on the floor just inside the doorway. His white hairs dripped red.

"Crook came early," howled Inspector Queen. "Look at the dean's

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wrist watch, Ellery — smashed in his fall at 7:15."

"I warned him not to unlock his door," wailed Ellery. Then he bellowed. "He's breathing! Call an ambulance!"

He had carried the dean's frail body to a couch in the inner office and was gently wetting the blue lips from a paper cup when the Inspector turned from the telephone.

The eyes fluttered open. "Ellery . . ."

"Doc, what happened?"

"Book . . . taken . . ." The voice trailed off in a mutter.

"Book taken?" repeated the Inspector incredulously. "That means Mimms not only came early, but Dr. Hope found the book was genuine! Is the money on him, son?"

Ellery searched the dean's pockets, the office, the anteroom. "It's gone."

"Then he did buy it. Then somebody came along, cracked him on the skull, and lifted the book."

"Doc!" Ellery bent over the old man again. "Doc, who struck you? Did you see?"

"Yes . . . Gorman . . ." Then the battered head rolled to one side and Dr. Hope lost consciousness.

"Gorman? Who's Gorman, Ellery?"

"Professor Oswald Gorman," Ellery said through his teeth, "one of the English faculty at the lunch today. *Get him.*"

When Inspector Queen returned to the dean's office guiding the agitated elbow of Professor Gorman, he found Ellery waiting behind the dean's flower vase as if it were a bough from Birnam Wood.

The couch was empty.

"What did the ambulance doctor say, Ellery?"

"Concussion. How bad they don't know yet." Ellery rose, fixing Professor Gorman with a Macduffian glance. "And where did you find this pedagogical louse, Dad?"

"Upstairs on the seventh floor, teaching a Bible class."

"The title of my course, Inspector Queen," said the Professor furiously, "is *The Influence of the Bible on English Literature.*"

"Trying to establish an alibi, eh?"

"Well, son," said his father in a troubled voice, "the professor's more than just tried. He's done it."

"Established an alibi?" Ellery cried.

"It's a two-hour seminar, from six to eight. He's alibied for every second from 6 P.M. on by the dozen people taking the course — including a minister, a priest, and a rabbi. What's more," mused the Inspector, "even assuming the 7:15 on the dean's broken watch was a plant, Professor Gorman can account for every minute of his day since your lunch broke up. Ellery, something is rotten in New York County."

"I beg your pardon," said a British voice from the anteroom. "I was to meet Dr. Hope here at eight o'clock."

Ellery whirled. Then he swooped down on the owner of the voice, a pale skinny man in a bowler hat

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carrying a package under one arm.

"Don't tell me you're Alfred Mimms and you're just bringing the Bacon!"

"Yes, but I'll — I'll come back," stammered the visitor, trying to hold on to his package. But it was Ellery who won the tug of war, and as he tore the wrappings away the pale man turned to run.

And there was Inspector Queen in the doorway with his pistol showing. "Alfred Mimms, is it?" said the Inspector genially. "Last time, if memory serves, it was Lord Chalmerston. Remember, Dink, when you were sent up for selling a phony First Folio to that Oyster Bay millionaire? Ellery, this is Dink Chalmers of Flatbush, one of the cleverest confidence men in the rare-book game." Then the Inspector's geniality faded. "But, son, this leaves us in more of a mess than before."

"No, dad," said Ellery. "This clears the mess up."

From Inspector Queen's expression, it did nothing of the kind.

"Because what did Doc Hope reply when I asked him what happened?" Ellery said. "He replied, 'Book taken.' Well, obviously, the book wasn't taken. The book was never here. Therefore he didn't mean to say 'book taken.' Professor, you're a devotee of the Matthew Arnold Hope Cult of Spoonerisms: What must the dean have meant to say?"

" 'Took . . . Bacon'!" said Professor Gorman.

"Which makes no sense, either, unless we recall, Dad, that his voice trailed off. As if he meant to add a word, but failed. Which word? The word 'money' — 'took Bacon *money*.' Because while the Bacon book wasn't here to be taken, the ten thousand dollars Doc Hope was toting around all day to pay for it was.

"And who took the Bacon money? The one who knocked on the dean's door just after seven o'clock and asked to be let in. The one who, when Dr. Hope unlocked the door — indicating the knocker was someone he knew and trusted — promptly clobbered the old man and made off with his life's savings."

"But when you asked who hit him," protested the Inspector, "he answered 'Gorman'."

"Which he couldn't have meant, either, since the professor has an alibi of granite. Therefore —".

"Another spoonerism!" exclaimed Professor Gorman.

"I'm afraid so. And since the only spoonerism possible from the name 'Gorman' is 'Morgan,' hunt up Mr. Morgan Naseby of the underpaid English department, Dad, and you'll have Doc's assailant and his ten grand back, too."

Later, at Bellevue Hospital, an indestructible Elizabethan scholar squeezed the younger Queen hand feebly. Conversation was forbidden, but the good pedagogue and spoonerist extraordinary did manage to whisper, "My queer Dean . . ."

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If you accept the premise that Voltaire's Zadig was the world's first detective (pioneer, prototype, forerunner, or even primitive), then we should all be grateful to Professor Jacques Barzun for pinpointing the world's second detective — no less a personage than Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais. This Eighteenth Century French playwright is perhaps best remembered as the author of LE BARBIER DE SÈVILLE *and* LE MARIAGE DE FIGARO *— comedies which inspired the famous operas by Rossini and Mozart.*

Beaumarchais's solo flight in deduction occurred 28 years after Zadig's, but in the royal line of ratiocination Beaumarchais preceded Caleb Williams by 18 years, Vidocq by 52, Dupin by 65, Jean Valjean by 86, Lecoq by 91, Cuff by 92, and Sherlock Holmes by well over a century, 111 years to be exact. And we confess that in all our research into that royal line, we never came upon Beaumarchais's deductive exploit . . .

In this confusing world in which the detective story so often suffers from literary snobbishness and second-class citizenship, it is deeply reassuring to learn that Professor Barzun is a devoted reader of 'tecs, and that his interest is avid enough for him to contribute his personal scholarship to the detective field. Professor Barzun's article is not only fresh and stimulating, it is also an important historical discovery.

Professor Barzun, American historian of French birth, calls himself "a student of cultural history." His chief work in the past decade has been in the fields of criticism, education, and musicology, including ROMANTICISM AND THE MODERN EGO, THE TEACHER IN AMERICA, *and a two-volume biography of Hector Berlioz. His latest book is titled* THE ENERGIES OF ART, *and it contains a chapter on the significance of detective fiction in modern culture.*

THE WORLD'S SECOND DETECTIVE

by JACQUES BARZUN

HISTORIANS OF THE DETECTIVE art have long known that the eminent Babylonian, Zadig, whose biographer was Voltaire, must be accounted a pioneer. What is less well known is that a Frenchman named Beaumarchais, himself the biographer of an eminent Spaniard named Figaro, must also take his place among the early and gifted readers of clues.

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Beaumarchais, it is true, claims no credit for his feat but assigns it to his master, Zadig. But whereas Zadig worked in the dubious Middle East and upon problems at once royal and rural, Beaumarchais was of his own time and place, and in the single recorded example we have of his powers he tackled the far more difficult problem of determining identity from an article lost by an ordinary person in a big city.

Our source for the incident is Beaumarchais's own account, entitled *Gaîté faite à Londres* and addressed to the Editor of the *Morning Chronicle* to advertise the finding of the lost article. The date, May 6, 1776, enabled Beaumarchais to bring in a provocative reference to the American Revolution in which he was soon to play so prominent a part. The piece may be read among the *Mélanges* in Beaumarchais's *Oeuvres Complètes*. But since these are not everywhere available, or the meaning accessible to non-readers of French, I translate below the significant passages . . .

Beaumarchais, who signs himself *L'Amateur francais*, first states that two days earlier, he found a lady's black taffeta evening cloak at a concert-and-ball and wishes to restore it to its owner. He then goes on:

"In order that there may be no mistake about this, I must inform you that the person who wore it on that day also wore pink feathers in her headdress and, I believe, long diamond earrings. But of this I am not so certain as of the rest — namely, that she is tall and has a good figure. Her hair is silvery blonde, her complexion dazzlingly light; her neck is slim and fine, and so is her waist. As for her foot, it is the prettiest in the world. I observe also that she is quite young, rather lively, and a trifle heedless; she has a light step and a great fondness for dancing."

Beaumarchais repeats that he does not know her, but "without claiming credit for a talent which is one no longer since the late Zadig of happy memory disclosed its method, I would ask you, Sir, to imagine that while examining this cloak I found sticking to the material of the hood a few hairs of a beautiful blonde color as well as a few fragments of pink feathers obviously belonging to a headdress. You will readily see that it took no great effort of genius to conclude that the hair and coiffure of this blonde must be like the samples that had become detached from it . . .

"And since such hair never grew upon a dark brow or a dark skin, analogy would suggest to you as it did to me that this beauty with the silver-blonde hair must have a dazzling complexion . . . Similarly, a very slight pulling of the threads in the taffeta, on each inner side of the hood (such as cannot have been produced except by the constant friction of two small hard bodies in motion) told me, not that she wore long earrings on that day, but that she usually wears them. If my reasoning is false, do not, Sir, spare me. Strictness is no injustice.

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"The rest goes without saying. Anyone can see that I had only to examine the ribbon which fastens the cloak about the neck and to tie the knot at the place shown by the wrinkling to observe that the space thus bounded was slight. Hence the neck daily enclosed therein must be slim and fine — no difficulty here.

"Measuring then the distance between the top of the cloak and the horizontal fold or wrinkling produced below by the tying of it, French fashion, to set off the waist and gather the upper part above the hips while the lower falls softly in lace flounces over a rounded and well-defined posterior, I decided as would any connoisseur that with such a tapered waist and rich bust the owner must be tall and well made. The thing speaks for itself: the artist detects the nude beneath the drapery.

"Suppose further, Sir, that while examining the middle of the cloak, you had found on the black taffeta the print of a very pretty shoe outlined in gray dust. Would you not have reasoned that, if some other woman had stepped on the cloak after it had slipped to the floor, she would have deprived me of the pleasure of picking it up? After this you could no longer doubt that the print was that of the owner of the cloak herself. Whereupon you would reflect that if her shoe is so small, her pretty foot must be still smaller . . .

"But this print, which was made by the way and without being even noticed, implies (besides a great liveliness of gait) a strong preoccupation of mind, to which persons that are grave, old, or cold-blooded are seldom liable. From this I deduced that my charming blonde is in the flower of youth, most vivacious and proportionately heedless . . . Finally, remembering that the place where I found her cloak led to the spot where the dancing was growing liveliest, I I concluded that the lady was very fond of that pastime, for only its appeal could have made her forget and step on her cloak . . .

"And when, the next day, I recalled that in a place where so many came and went I had been the one who chanced to pick up a cloak (proving that it had just been dropped), without being able to find its owner (which showed that she had already gone a considerable distance), I said to myself: Assuredly this young lady is the most vivacious beauty in England, Scotland, and Ireland. If I do not add America it is only because recently people have grown devilishly vivacious in that country . . ."

We can see that this Beaumarchais was at once cunning and candid . . .

The rules of the art, as we all know, were to change radically in the ensuing century and a half. Poe's Dupin is toplofty and Sherlock Holmes impatient; Reggie Fortune can only bleat about his aunt, and Nero Wolfe glares speechless. The old régime, in short, had something to be said for it: its detectives were scholars *and* gentlemen.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **LIAM O'FLAHERTY**

TITLE: ***The Pedlar's Revenge***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Ireland

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The Pedlar and old Paddy Moynihan were bitter enemies. Now, Paddy weighed over 300 pounds, and was the tallest, strongest man in living memory; and the Pedlar was very small and so stooped he was bent almost double. A strange pair to be feuding these 70-odd years . . .*

OLD PADDY MOYNIHAN WAS DEAD when the police appeared on the scene from their barracks. He lay stretched out on his back at the bottom of the deep ravine below the blacksmith's house. His head rested on a smooth round granite stone and his hands were crossed over his enormous stomach. His battered old black hat was tied onto his skull with a piece of twine that passed beneath his chin.

Men and boys from the village stood around him in a circle, discussing the manner of his death in subdued tones. Directly overhead, men and women leaned in a compact group over the low stone wall of the blacksmith's yard. They were all peering down into the shadowy depths of the ravine at the dim shape of the dead man, with their mouths wide open and a look of horror in their eyes.

Sergeant Toomey made a brief inspection of the corpse and then turned to Joe Finnerty, the rate collector. "Tommy Murtagh told me," he said, "that it was you —"

"Yes," said Finnerty. "It was I sent Tommy along to fetch you. I told him to get a priest as well, but no priest came."

"Both the parish priest and the

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curate are away on sick calls at the moment," said the sergeant.

"In any case," said Finnerty, "there was little that a priest could do for him. The poor old fellow remained unconscious from the moment he fell until he died."

"Did you see him fall?" said the sergeant.

"I did," said Finnerty. "I was coming down the road when I caught sight of him on the blacksmith's wall there above. He was very excited. He kept shouting and brandishing his stick. 'The Pedlar poisoned me,' he said. He kept repeating that statement in a singsong shout, over and over again, like a whining child. Then he got to his feet and moved forward, heading for the road. He had taken only half a step, though, when he seemed to get struck by some sort of a colic. He dropped his stick, clutched his stomach with both hands and staggered backward, bent almost double, to sit down again on the wall. The next thing I knew, he was going head over heels into the ravine, backward, yelling like a stuck pig. Upon my soul! His roaring must have been heard miles away."

"It was a terrific yell, all right," said Peter Lavin, the doctor's servant. "I was mowing down there below in the meadow when I heard it. I raised my head like a shot and saw old Paddy go through the air. He looked as big as a house. He turned somersault twice before he passed out of my sight, going on away down into the hole. I heard the splash, though, when he struck the ground. It was like a heavy sack dropped into the sea from a boat's deck." He pointed toward a deep wide dent in the wet ground to the right and added, "That was where he landed."

The sergeant walked over and looked at the hollow. The whole ground was heavily laden with water that flowed from the mossy face of the cliff. Three little boys had stuck a rolled dock leaf into a crevice. They were drinking in turn at the thin jet of water that came from the bright green funnel.

"Why did he think he was poisoned?" said the sergeant.

"I've no idea," said Finnerty. "It's certain, in any case, that he had swallowed something that didn't agree with him. The poor fellow was in convulsions with pain shortly before he fell."

The sergeant looked up along the sheer face of the cliff at a thick cluster of ivy that grew just beneath the overarching brow. A clutch of young sparrows were chirping plaintively for food from their nest within the ivy.

"According to him," the sergeant said, as he walked back to the corpse, "The Pedlar was responsible for whatever ailed him."

"That's right," said Finnerty. "He kept repeating over and over again that The Pedlar had poisoned him. I wouldn't pay much heed to that, though. The Pedlar and himself were bitter enemies. They have accused each other of every crime in the calendar scores of times."

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"Faith, I saw him coming out of The Pedlar's house a few hours ago," said Anthony Gill. "He didn't look like a poisoned man at that time. He had a broad smile on his face, and he was shuffling down along the road toward me. I asked him where he was going in such a great hurry and he told me to mind my own business. I looked back after he had passed and saw him go into Pete Maloney's shop.'

"I was there when he came in," said Bartly Timoney. "He was looking for candles."

"Candles?" said the sergeant.

"He bought four candles," Timoney said. "He practically ran out of the shop with them, mumbling to himself and laughing. Begob, like Anthony there said, he seemed to be in great form at the time."

"Candles?" said the sergeant again. "Why should he be in such a great hurry to buy candles?"

"Poor man!" said Finnerty. "He was very old and not quite right in the head. Lord have mercy on him! He's been half mad these last two years, ever since he lost his wife. Ah! The poor old fellow is better off dead than the way he was fixed, all alone in his little cottage, without anybody to feed him or to keep him clean."

The sergeant turned to Peter Lavin and said, "When is the doctor coming back from town?"

"He won't be back until late this evening," Lavin said. "He's waiting over for the result of the operation on Tom Kelly's wife."

"All right, lads," the sergeant said. "We might as well see about removing poor old Moynihan."

"That's easier said than done," said Anthony Gill. "A few weeks ago, to settle a bet, we weighed him on Quinn's scales against three sacks of flour. Charley Ridge, the lighthousekeeper, bet a pound note that old Moynihan was heavier than three sacks of flour, and Tommy Perkins covered the pound, maintaining that he would fall short of that weight. The lighthousekeeper lost, but it was only by a whisker. I never saw anything go so close. There were only a few ounces in the difference. Well, three sacks of flour weigh three hundred and thirty-six pounds. How are we going to carry that much dead weight up out of this hole?"

"The simplest way, Sergeant," said Guard Hynes, "would be to get a rope and haul him straight up to the blacksmith's yard."

Everybody agreed with Hynes.

"I've got a lot of gear belonging to my boat up at the house," said Bartly Timoney. "I'll go and get a strong rope." He began to clamber up the side of the ravine.

"Bring a couple of slings as well," the sergeant called after him. "They'll keep him steady."

All the younger men followed Timoney, in order to give a hand with the hauling.

"There may be heavier men than old Moynihan," said Finnerty to those that remained below with the corpse, "but he was the tallest and the strongest man seen in this part of the

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country within living memory. He was six feet ten inches in his bare feet and there was no known limit to his strength. I've seen him toss a full-grown bullock, without appearing to exert himself in the least. It was in the field behind Tom Daly's public house at Gortmor. Then he drank the three gallons of porter that he won for doing it as quickly as you or I could swallow three pints."

"He was a strong man, all right," said Gill. "You could heap a horse's load onto his back and he'd walk away with it, as straight as a rod, calmly smoking his pipe."

"Yet he was as gentle as a child," said Lavin, "in spite of his strength. They say that he never struck anybody in his whole life."

"Many is the day he worked on my land," said Sam Clancy, "and I'll agree that he was as good as any ten men. He could keep going from morning to night without slackening pace. However, it was the devil's own job giving him enough to eat. The side of a pig, or even a whole sheep, would make no more than a good snack for him. The poor fellow told me that he suffered agonies from hunger. He could never get enough to eat. It must have been absolute torture for him when he got too old to work and had to live on his pension."

Timoney came back and threw down two slings, over the low wall where the women and girls were gathered. Then he let down the end of a stout rope. Sergeant Toomey made one sling fast about Moynihan's upper chest and the other about his knees. Then he passed the end of the rope through the slings and knotted it securely.

"Haul away now," he said to Timoney.

The two old sparrows fluttered back and forth across the ravine, uttering shrill cries as they saw the corpse drawn slowly up along the face of the cliff. The fledglings remained silent — in obedience to these constantly repeated warnings — until old Moynihan's dangling right hand brushed gently against the ivy outside their nest. This light sound being like that made by the bodies of their parents when entering with food, the young birds broke into a frenzied chatter. Thereupon, the old birds became hysterical with anxiety. The mother dropped a piece of worm from her beak. Then she and her cock, with all their feathers raised, hurled themselves at old Moynihan's head. They kept attacking him fiercely, with beak and claw, until he was drawn up over the wall and into the yard.

When the corpse was stretched out on the blacksmith's cart, Sergeant Toomey turned to the women that were there and said, "It would be an act of charity for ye to come and get him ready for burial. He has nobody of his own to wash and shave him."

"In God's name," they said, "we'll do whatever is needed."

They all followed the men that were pushing the cart up the road toward the dead man's cottage.

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"Listen," the sergeant said to Finnerty, as they walked along side by side. "Didn't The Pedlar bring old Moynihan to court at one time over the destruction of a shed?"

"He did, faith," said Finnerty, "and he was awarded damages, too, by District Justice Roche."

"How long ago was that?" said the sergeant.

"It must be over twenty years."

"A long time before I came here," said the sergeant. "I never heard the proper details of the story."

"It was only a ramshackle old shed," said Finnerty. "It was where The Pedlar used to keep all the stuff he collected around the countryside, rags and old iron and bits of ancient furniture and all sorts of curiosities, that had been washed ashore from wrecked ships. Moynihan came along one day and saw The Pedlar's ass tied to the iron staple in the doorjamb of the shed. Lord have mercy on the dead! He was very fond of playing childish pranks, like all simple-minded big fellows. So he got a turnip and stuck it onto the end of his stick. Then he leaned over the wall of The Pedlar's backyard and began to torment the ass, drawing the unfortunate animal on and on after the turnip.

"The ass kept straining at its rope until the doorjamb was drawn out of the wall. Then the wall collapsed and finally the whole shed came down in a heap. The Pedlar was away at the time and nobody saw the damage being done except old Moynihan himself. The poor fellow would have got into no trouble if he had kept his mouth shut. Instead of doing so, he ran down into the village and told everybody what had happened. He nearly split his sides laughing at his own story. As a result of his confessions, he very naturally didn't have a foot to stand on when the case came up before the court."

The dead man's cottage looked desolate. The little garden in front was overgrown with weeds. There were several large holes in the roof. The door was broken. The windows were covered with sacking. The interior was in a shocking state of filth and disorder.

"He'll have to stay on the cart," said Sergeant Toomey, after he had inspected the two rooms, "until there is a proper place to lay him out like a Christian."

He left Guard Hynes in charge of the body and then set off with Joe Finnerty for The Pedlar's cottage.

"I couldn't find the candles," he said on the way. "Neither could I find out exactly what he had for his last meal. His little pot and his frying pan were on the hearth, having evidently been used to prepare whatever he ate. There was a small potato skin at the bottom of the pot, but the frying pan was licked as clean as a new pin. God only knows what he fried in it."

"Poor old Paddy!" said Finnerty. "He had been half starved for a long time. He was going around like a dog, scavenging for miserable scraps in

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shameful places. Yet people gave him sufficient food to satisfy the appetite of any ordinary person, in addition to what he was able to buy with his pension money."

The Pedlar's cottage was only a few yards away from Moynihan's sordid hovel, and its neatness offered a very striking contrast. It was really very pretty, with window frames painted dark blue and its walls spotlessly white and the bright May sunlight sparkling on its slate roof. The garden was well stocked with fruit and vegetables and flowers, all cared for in a manner that bore evidence to the owner's constant diligence and skill. It also contained three hives of honeybees, which made a pleasant clamor as they worked among the flowers. The air was charged with a delicious perfume that was carried up by the gentle breeze from the different plants and flowers.

The Pedlar hailed the two men as they were approaching the house along a narrow, flagged path that ran through the center of the garden.

"Good day," he said to them. "What's going on over at Paddy Moynihan's house? I heard a cart and a lot of people arrive there."

He was sitting on a three-legged stool to the right of the open doorway. His palsied hands moved constantly up and down over the knotted surface of a blackthrorn stick which he held erect between his knees. His legs were also palsied. The metaled heels of his boots kept beating an almost inaudible tattoo on the broad, smooth flagstone beneath his stool. He was very small and so stooped that he was bent almost double. His boots, his threadbare black suit, his white shirt and his black felt hat were all very neat, like his house and his garden. Indeed, he was immaculately clean from head to foot, except for his wrinkled little face. It was in great part covered with stubbly gray hair that looked more like an animal's fur than a proper human beard.

"It was old Paddy Moynihan himself," the sergeant said solemnly, "that was brought home on the cart."

The Pedlar laughed, dryly in his throat, making a sound that was plaintive and without merriment, like the bleating of a goat. "Ho! Ho! Did the shameless scoundrel get drunk again?" he cried out in a thin high-pitched voice. "Two months ago, he got speechless in Richie Tallon's pub with two sheep jobbers from Castlegorm. He had to be taken home in Phil Manion's ass cart. There wasn't room for the whole of him in the cart. Two lads had to follow along behind, holding up the lower parts of his legs."

"Old Paddy is dead," the sergeant said in a stern tone.

On nearing this news, The Pedlar was motionless for a few moments, his shrewd eyes looking upward at the sergeant's face from beneath the bushy gray eyebrows. Then his heels began once more to beat their tattoo upon the hollow-sounding flagstone, and his hands moved tremulously along the surface of the blackthorn stick, up and down without pause.

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"I'll ask God to have mercy on his soul," he said coldly, "but I won't say that I'm sorry to hear he's dead. Why should I? To tell you the honest truth, the news that you bring lifts a great weight off my mind. How did he die?"

He again laughed dryly in his throat after the sergeant had told him the manner of old Moynihan's death. His laughter now sounded gay. "It must have been his weight that killed him," he said, "for John Delaney, the carpenter that used to live in Srulane long ago, fell down at that very same place without hurting himself in the least. It was a terrible night, about forty years ago. Delaney was coming home alone from a funeral at Tirnee, where he had gone to make the coffin. As usual, he was dead drunk and never let a word out of him as he fell. He stayed down there in the hole for the rest of that night and all next day. He crawled out of it at nightfall, as right as rain. That same Delaney was the king of all drunkards. I remember one time he fell into a coffin he was making for an old woman at —"

"I must warn you," Sergeant Toomey interrupted, "that Paddy Moynihan made certain allegations against you, in the presence of Joe Finnerty here, shortly before he died. They were to the effect that you . . ."

"Ho! Ho! Bad cess to the scoundrel!" The Pedlar interrupted. "He's been making allegations against me all his life. He's been tormenting me too. God forgive me! I've hated that wicked man since I was a child."

"You've hated him all that time?"

"We were the same age," said The Pedlar. "I'll be seventy-nine next month. I'm only a few weeks older than Paddy. We started going to school on the very same day. He took a violent dislike to me from the first moment he laid eyes on me. I was born stooped, just the same as I am now. I was delicate into the bargain, and they didn't think I'd live. When I was seven or eight years old, I was no bigger than a dwarf. On the other hand, Paddy Moynihan was already a big hefty block of a lad. He was twice the size of other boys his own age. He tortured me in every way that he could. His favorite trick was to sneak up behind me and yell into my ear. You know what a powerful voice he had as a grown man? Well! It was very nearly as powerful when he was a lad. His yell was deep and rumbling, like the roar of an angry bull. I always fell down in a fit whenever he sneaked up behind me and yelled into my ear."

"That was no way to treat a delicate lad," said the sergeant in a sympathetic tone. "It was no wonder that you got to hate him."

"Don't believe a word of what he's telling you," Finnerty said to the sergeant. "Paddy Moynihan never did anything of the sort."

The Pedlar again became motionless for a few moments, with his eyes fixed on Finnerty's legs. Then his limbs resumed their dance and he turned his glance back to the sergeant's face.

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"He did worse things to me," he said. "He made the other scholars stand around me in a ring and beat my bare feet with small pebbles. He used to laugh at the top of his voice while he watched them do it. If I tried to break out of the ring, or sat down on the ground and put my feet under me, he'd threaten me with worse torture. 'Stand up there,' he'd say, 'or I'll keep shouting into your ear until you die.' Of course, I'd rather let them go on beating me than have him do the other thing. Oh, the shouting in my ear was a terrible torture. I used to froth at the mouth so much when I fell down that they thought for a long time I had epilepsy."

"You old devil!" cried Finnerty angrily. "You should be ashamed of yourself for telling lies about the dead."

"Let him have his say," the sergeant said to Finnerty. "Every man has a right to say what he pleases on his own threshold."

"He has no right to speak ill of the dead, all the same," said Finnerty, "especially when there isn't a word of truth in what he says. Sure, it's well known that poor old Paddy Moynihan, Lord have mercy on him, wouldn't hurt a fly. There was no more harm in him than in a babe unborn."

The sergeant said, "Take it easy, Joe. There are two sides to every story." Then he turned to The Pedlar and added, "Faith, you had cause to hate Moynihan, all right. No wonder you planned to get revenge on him."

"I was too much afraid of him at that time," said The Pedlar, "to think of revenge. He had the life nearly frightened out of me. He and his gang used to hunt me all the way home from school, throwing little stones at me and clods of dirt. 'Pedlar, Pedlar, Pedlar,' they'd shout and they coming after me."

"Musha, bad luck to you," said Finnerty, "for a cunning old rascal, trying to make us believe it was Paddy Moynihan that put the scholars up to shouting 'Pedlar' after you. Sure, everybody in the parish has shouted 'Pedlar' after a Counihan at one time or other and thought nothing of it. Neither did the Counihans. Why should they? They've all been known as 'The Pedlars' from one generation to another, every mother's son of them."

"Leave the man alone," the sergeant said to Finnerty, and he walked over to the open doorway and thrust his head into the kitchen.

The fireplace, the dressers that were laden with beautiful old brown delftware, and the flagged floor were all spotlessly clean and brightly polished.

"Ah! Woe!" The Pedlar cried out in a loud voice, as he began to rock himself like a lamenting woman. "The Counihans are all gone except myself, and I'll soon be gone too, leaving no kith or kin behind me. The day of the wandering merchant is now done. He and his ass will climb no more up from the sea along the stony mountain roads, bringing lovely bright

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things from faraway cities to the wild people of the glens. Ah! Woe! Woe!"

"If you were that much afraid of Moynihan," said the sergeant, as he walked back from the doorway to The Pedlar's stool, "it must have been the devil's own job for you to get revenge on him."

The Pedlar stopped rocking himself and looked up sideways at the sergeant. There was a very cunning smile on his little bearded face. "It was easy," he whispered in a tone of intense pleasure, "once I had learned his secret."

"What secret did he have?" said the sergeant.

"He was a coward," said The Pedlar.

"A coward!" cried Finnerty. "Paddy Moynihan a coward!"

"Keep quiet, Joe," said the sergeant.

"It happened," said The Pedlar, "when I was nineteen years old and in such a poor state of health that I was barely able to walk. Yet I had to keep going. My mother, Lord have mercy on her, had just died after a long sickness, leaving me alone in the world with hardly a penny to my name. I was coming home one evening from Ballymullen, with a load of goods in my ass's creels, when Moynihan came along and began to torment me.

"'Your load isn't properly balanced,' he said. 'It's going to overturn.' Then he began to pick up loose stones from the road and to put them into the creels, first into one and then into the other, pretending that he was trying to balance the load. I knew very well what he had in mind, but I said nothing. I was speechless with fright.

"Then he suddenly began to laugh, and he took bigger stones from the wall and threw them into the creels, one after the other. Laughing at the top of his voice, he kept throwing in more and more stones, until the poor ass fell down under the terrible weight. That was more than I could bear. In spite of my terror, I picked up a stone and threw it at him. It wasn't much of a stone and I didn't throw it hard, but it struck him in the cheek and managed to draw blood. He put up his hand and felt the cut. Then he looked at his fingers.

"'The saints have mercy!' he said in a weak little voice. 'Blood is coming from my cheek. I'm cut!' Upon my soul, he let a terrible yell out of him and set off down the road as fast as he could toward the village, with his hand to his cheek and he screaming like a frightened girl. As for me, faith, I unloaded the creels and I went home happy that evening. There was a little bird singing in my heart, for I knew that Moynihan would never again be able to torture me."

"Right enough," said the sergeant, "you had him in your power after that. You had only to decide—"

"Best of all, though," The Pedlar interrupted excitedly, "was when I found out that he was mortally afraid of bees. Before that he was able to steal all my fruit and vegetables while

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I was out on the roads. It was no use keeping a dog. The sight of him struck terror into the fiercest dog there ever was."

"You wicked old black spider!" said Finnerty. "Why do you go on telling lies about the dead?"

"Keep quiet, Joe," said the sergeant. "Let him finish his story."

"All animals loved Moynihan," said Finnerty, "because he was kind to them. Children loved him too. Indeed, every living creature was fond of the poor old fellow except this vindictive little runt, who envied his strength and his good nature."

"So you got bees," the sergeant said to The Pedlar.

"I bought three hives," The Pedlar said, "and put them here in the garden. That did the trick. Ho! Ho! The ruffian has suffered agonies on account of those bees, especially since the war made food very scarce in the shops. Many is the good day's sport I've had, sitting here on my stool and watching him go back and forth like a hungry wolf, with his eyes fixed on the lovely fruit and vegetables that he dare not touch. Even so, I'm glad he's dead."

"You are?" said Sergeant Toomey.

"It takes a load off my mind," The Pedlar said.

"It does?" said the sergeant.

"Lately," said The Pedlar, "I was beginning to get afraid of him again. He was going mad with hunger. You can't trust a madman. In spite of his cowardice, he might attack me in order to rob my house and garden."

"Was that why you decided to poison him?" said the sergeant.

The Pedlar started and became motionless, with his upward-glancing eyes fixed on the sergeant's chest. He looked worried for a moment. Then his bearded face became suffused with a cunning smile and his palsied limbs resumed their dance. "You are a clever man, Sergeant Toomey," he whispered in a sneering tone, "but you'll never be able to prove that I've been in any way responsible for Paddy Moynihan's death."

"He was in your house today," said the sergeant.

"He was," said The Pedlar.

"Did you give him anything?" said the sergeant.

"I gave him nothing," said The Pedlar.

"You might as well tell the truth," said the sergeant. "When the doctor comes back this evening, we'll know exactly what old Paddy had to eat for his last meal."

"I can tell you that myself," said The Pedlar.

"You can?" said the sergeant.

"He bust into my kitchen," said The Pedlar, "while I was frying potatoes with some of the bacon fat that I collected in a bowl. 'Where did you get the bacon?' he said. He loved bacon and he was furious because there was none to be had in the shops. 'I have no bacon,' I said. 'You're a liar,' he said. 'I can smell it.' I was afraid to tell him the truth, for fear he might ransack the house and find my bowl of bacon fat. Then he'd kill me if

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I tried to prevent him from marching off with it. So I told him the first thing that came into my head, in order to get him out of the house. I told him it was candles I was frying with the potatoes. God forgive me! I was terribly frightened by the wild look in his eyes.

" 'Candles!' he cried. 'In that case, I'll soon be eating fried potatoes myself.' Then he ran out of the house. I locked the door as soon as he had gone. Not long afterward he came back and began to knock, but I let on that I didn't hear him. Finally, he gave the door a terrific kick that nearly took it off its hinges. 'You dirty miser!' he shouted. 'I have candles myself now. I'll soon be as well fed as you are.' He kept laughing and talking to himself as he went away. That was the last I saw or heard of him."

"You think he ate the candles?" said the sergeant.

"I'm certain of it," said The Pedlar. "He'd eat anything." Then he broke into a peal of mocking laughter.

"Do you hear him laugh?" cried Finnerty in disgust. "The scoundrel! I never in all my life heard him laugh like that before."

The Pedlar looked up into Finnerty's face for the first time. "It's a true saying," he said, "that the last laugh is always the best." Then he broke into another peal of laughter.

"May God forgive you!" Sergeant Toomey said to him.

"Why do you say that?" said The Pedlar.

"There's nothing the law can do," said the sergeant, "to a man as cunning as you. However, that will make it all the harder for God to grant you forgiveness."

"Ho! Ho!" The Pedlar cried defiatnly. "Little do I care for your threats of divine vengeance. My conscience is clear. It has never yet been considered a crime for a worm to turn on its mortal enemy. Ho! Ho! The persecuted and the despised have the last laugh. So the strong have to call on God for help. Ho! Ho! That's a queer one." Then he broke into still another peal of mocking laughter.

"Come on, Joe," the sergeant said to Finnerty. "Let's get out of here."

Finnerty spat on the ground at The Pedlar's feet. Then he followed Sergeant Toomey down through the garden.

"May God speed you," The Pedlar called after them in a mocking tone, "if it was with good will you came. If you came with intent to trap me by your cunning, then may the devil mend you."

He continued to laugh on a high shrill note while he watched them go along the flagged path to the gate and along the road back to Moynihan's sordid hovel.

The metaled heels of his boots now made a loud triumphant sound as they beat upon the flagstone, and his palsied hands moved at a frantic pace over the surface of the blackthorn stick, up and down, as if it were a pipe from which they were drawing music.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JAMES M. ULLMAN**

TITLE: ***Deputy Sheriff***

TYPE: Detective Story

LOCALE: Sunset, Indiana

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *For the past fourteen years, the population of Sunset — 84 people — looked to their deputy sheriff, Earl Andrews, to keep law and order. And Earl was proud that he knew his job. But he never liked to interfere in family business.*

THE SMALL BOY WATCHED AS THE old Ford rumbled down the hard mud road. Earl Andrews was late today. Dusk already obscured the outlines of the nondescript houses lining the one and only street of Sunset, Indiana. The Ford's parking lights were on.

The boy turned and ran across his lawn, across the next lawn — ran to the driveway where he knew the Ford would turn in. This was ritual. Every evening, when Earl returned from his eight-hour stint at the county jail in Fairtown ten miles away, the boy was waiting in the driveway to greet him.

Not far down the road, Luke Catline sat at his living-room table and stared blearily at the shotgun in the corner. If only he'd used it when he had the chance. They'd never have put him away. Not that they'd ever put him away again . . .

He poured another glass of whiskey.

"Sally," he called, "Shut up those damn kids. They get on my nerves. For Gawd's sake, shut 'em up!"

He contemplated the gun again. It was a good gun. It could blow a man in half . . .

The Ford turned off the road, slowly bumped up the driveway, finally halted. Earl Andrews did not own a garage. The Ford would sit out in the yard all night.

Earl didn't mind. That Ford in the driveway gave notice to the people

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of Sunset that their deputy sheriff, Earl Andrews, was home. Sunset, Indiana — population, 84 — was too small to afford the services of a town marshal. So Sunset depended on the county sheriff's office for whatever law enforcement it required. And Earl Andrews was the nearest representative of the county sheriff.

The small boy stood motionless as Earl turned off the motor and pulled the hand brake. Then Earl stepped out of the car and slammed the door.

Earl was a thin, middle-aged man, a shade under medium height. His eyes were set close together beneath scraggly, blond brows. A thin, unkempt moustache matted his upper lip.

He wore a brown, pin-striped suit with a vest, and a tan, broad-brimmed hat. A gun belt hung ostentatiously around his middle, and the handle of a .38 caliber revolver sometimes protruded from beneath his coat.

"Hi, Mr. Andrews," the small boy said.

"Hello, Bobby," Earl drawled. He spoke deliberately, slowly. Earl made a great show of deliberation at everything he did.

"Catch any crooks today?"

"Well, we had some bad boys down at the jail," Earl said. He walked forward and patted Bobby on the head. "Some very bad boys, Bobby. They stole a car and went joy-ridin'. They shouldn't have done that, because now they're in real trouble. John Markham, the prosecutor, he's gonna throw the book at 'em."

"Did they put up a fight?"

"Not much of a fight," Earl said. "They know better than that." Earl patted his gun and winked. "Nobody fools with Earl Andrews, you can bet."

"Mrs. Parker's inside," Bobby said.

The man and the boy walked up the steps of the front porch.

"What's she want?" Earl asked.

"I dunno," Bobby said. "She got here 'bout ten minutes ago. Said she called the jail but you'd already left for home."

"Business, was it?"

"I guess it was business. She wouldn't tell me."

Sally Catline tried to quiet the children. A thin girl barely out of her teens, she leaned over their bed and spoke softly, caressing them.

If only the children were a little older. She could tell them enough to make them understand, and then maybe they could all sneak out the back way.

But the two little ones were too small for that. Luke would hear them.

And she couldn't leave without the children. She couldn't leave the children alone with Luke — not when Luke was like this.

She had never seen Luke like this. He had done bad things to her before, yes, but today it was as though he'd lost his mind completely. And this was the first time he'd ever taken out the shotgun while he was drinking, and loaded it, and put it in the corner.

"I don't want nobody nosing

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around," Luke had told her. "I don't want nobody I ain't invited coming into my home. They ain't going to lock me up no more, Sally. I don't care if the governor of Indiana himself comes here. I'm gonna have me a sociable drink or two and nobody's gonna bother me . . ."

Earl opened the door and stood aside, while Bobby preceded him into the house. Then he followed Bobby through the hall and into the parlor.

Mrs. Parker had been sitting in a rocking chair that faced a television set. She rose when Earl and the boy entered. Mrs. Parker was a short, heavy-set woman not much older than Earl. Her face reflected worry mingled with determination.

"Evening, Earl. Hello there, Bobby."

Earl asked, "Can I fetch you something, Mrs. Parker? Some coffee, maybe?"

"No, thank you, Earl." She glanced at Bobby. "Earl, there's a little something I'd like to talk over with you."

Earl understood.

"Sure," he said. He turned to Bobby. "Son, isn't it about time for your dinner?"

"Not for half an hour yet," the boy said. "That's when daddy comes home from the plant."

"Well, come in here," Earl said. He walked toward the kitchen. "I'll let you play with the Colt .45 while I talk to Mrs. Parker. How's that?"

The boy followed him into the kitchen. Earl went to the pantry, opened a drawer, and took out a big revolver. It hadn't been loaded for ten years, but Earl conscientiously checked it again, just to be certain. Then he handed the gun to Bobby.

"You play for a couple of minutes," he said. "I got business with Mrs. Parker. Stay here till I come get you."

Luke Catline hunched his great shoulders. He reached for the glass of whiskey, lifted it, drained it.

He was a big man, tall and angular. He wore a pair of Army surplus shoes, blue jeans, a soiled T-shirt. His outthrust jaw was matted with beard, and locks of black, oily hair dangled over his forehead.

He thought: a man can be trapped. With a wife and kids and a stinking job and no way out, not ever. That was bad enough.

But now they wanted to cage him, too. They'd caged him once, for six months, just because he got drunk and stirred up a fuss and hit his wife a few times and took a swing at the state troopers when they came to arrest him. Six months without liquor, without a woman; six months of nothing but foul words from his captors.

No, a man shouldn't be caged. A man was created to be free, to roam and do as he pleased, and what happened in the family was the family's affair, not the business of the State of Indiana.

No, they'd have to take him dead the next time. Some men could stand being caged, but Luke Catline wasn't

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one of those men. Luke Catline had to be free, or he'd die, he'd wither away . . .

Mrs. Parker waited until Earl shut the parlor doors. Then, after Earl had seated himself on the couch and filled his pipe, she said:

"Earl, I don't like to go messing into other people's business. But things have gone too far. Luke Catline got drunk again today."

"Nothin' unusual in that," Earl said.

"Don't think for a minute I care much about Luke Catline," Mrs. Parker said. "It's that little doll of a wife and those two babies of his I'm worried about."

"Luke's been drunk plenty times before. And it wasn't four months ago he came back from the penal farm for acting up. The man's behaved pretty good since . . ."

"He wasn't behaving very well today. He was dead drunk at nine o'clock this mornin'. I seen him staggerin' all over that rundown farm of his. He was shoutin' and hollerin' this afternoon, and then he started beatin' up his wife again. Sally Catline can't handle that man, Earl. She'll get hurt bad."

"You're sure you ain't imagining things?"

"I went over there half an hour ago. Sally was in the yard, and I had a talk with her. She's scared to death, for the kids. She says Luke has gone kind of crazy. I tried to telephone you at the jail, but they said you'd just left. So I came right over here to catch you as soon as you came home. You've got to go over there and stop that man, Earl."

Luke said, "Sally, you come out here. Come out here right now."

Obediently, she came.

"Sally," he said, "was that Mrs. Parker I saw nosin' around here about half an hour ago?"

"She was here, Luke. She came to return some things."

"You know I don't like Mrs. Parker, Sally, after the way she brought the law down on me the last time and I got took away. Those state troopers were drivin' down the road, mindin' their own business, and she flagged 'em down and sent 'em over here. I don't want that woman around our house."

"She just came, Luke. I couldn't stop her."

"You didn't tell her to bring no law again, did you?"

"No, Luke, I wouldn't do that."

"You'd better not do that. You know what I'll do to you if you bring the law down on me again?"

He proceeded to tell her, while she leaned against the door and wept.

Earl lit his pipe, took several deep draws.

"Well, now," he said. "It's up to Sally, y'know, to put in a complaint. All she has to do is get holt of John Markham and fill out a warrant."

Mrs. Parker snorted in disgust.

"Luke won't let that child out of

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his sight when he's drunk that way," she said. "Especially after the day I found those state troopers and they went and arrested him. Anyhow, how could she get hold of John Markham? She's got no telephone. How can she get to the city in the dark, unless Luke drives her? And if she got to the city, how could she find John Markham? Likely, he's boozin' around some bar himself with his politician friends, at this hour."

"Well, m'am," Earl said, "this is a family matter. And the sheriff's office don't like to mess with no family matter if it can help it."

Mrs. Parker watched him closely.

"Earl, you ain't afraid of Luke Catline, are you?"

"Nothin' like that," Earl said irritably. "The way I figure it, it's family business. It ain't like Luke robbed somebody. I still think maybe the judge made a mistake, sending Luke to the farm the first time, for what's really a family matter."

"After what the doctor found he'd done to poor Sally?"

"Well . . ."

"And it's no family matter this time either, Earl. I heard that girl screamin' this afternoon. If you won't go over there, Earl, I'll call the sheriff, and he will."

Earl felt trapped. Above all, he didn't want the sheriff coming down here. He didn't want the sheriff to think he couldn't handle the people in Sunset.

"Well, now," Earl said, "maybe I will drop over, a little later."

"You go over right now," Mrs. Parker insisted, "or else I get on your telephone and call the sheriff. Maybe that Catline woman will never swear out another warrant, but I'll swear one out. For disturbin' the peace."

Earl banged his pipe on the arm of the couch.

"I'll go over as soon as I can," he snapped.

Mrs. Parker moved toward the door.

"Now you be careful, Earl," she said. "For forty years you been friend to me and my family, and I'd hate to think any harm came to you because of me. But after all, it's your job, Earl."

"Yes, m'am."

She left. The door slammed behind her.

"Go to the window," Luke said. "Look over at Mrs. Parker's house."

"Yes, Luke."

She went to the window.

"Do you see her house?"

"Yes."

"Are the lights on?"

"Only the parlor light, Luke."

"That means she's gone out. But I didn't hear her car. She couldn't have gone far. Where you suppose she's gone?"

"Probably to the neighbors, Luke."

"Do you think she went to see that deputy, Andrews?"

"I don't know where she went."

"Did you *tell* her to see the deputy?"

"No, I didn't. I wouldn't do that."

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"All the same, I don't like it. Mrs. Parker never goes out after dinner on Tuesday nights. She always stays home and looks at the television. Why did she go out tonight, after talking to you?"

"I don't know, Luke."

He got up.

"I want my shotgun," he said. "I want my shotgun near me, on my lap. I want my shotgun in case any damn fool comes around here and tries to meddle in my business."

He staggered to the corner and picked up his shotgun.

Earl let Bobby play with the Colt .45 for a few more moments. Then he said:

"All right, Bobby. That's enough."

"Aw . . ."

"Come on, now, Bobby. Your maw'll be lookin' for you."

Bobby handed over the gun. Earl patted his head.

Bobby asked: "Mr. Andrews, are you afraid of Luke Catline? I heard you and Mrs. Parker talkin'."

"No, boy, I ain't afraid of Luke Catline."

"How long you been a deputy, Mr. Andrews?"

"Fourteen years. Seen four sheriffs in my time. I know more about how to operate a jail than any man in this part of Indiana. There's a lot of red tape involved, Bobby, but I know it all. I play my politics right, too. Remember that when you grow up and get to be a man, Bobby. Play your politics right."

"How many men have you killed, Mr. Andrews?"

"Well, I haven't killed any, exactly. But I've handled some tough characters in my time."

"Who was the toughest?"

Earl launched into a completely fictitious story about a bank robber named McGraw. When he finished, he said, "All right, now. You go home and see your mama, or she'll start worryin'."

He gave the boy a penny — another ritual of theirs — and sent him away.

Luke fondled the shotgun. His father had given him that shotgun.

"Get away from the door, Sally," he said.

"Why don't you put that gun down. Luke? Nobody's comin'."

"We'll see," he said. "Pour me another drink. Pour yourself a drink, too. And drink it or I'll kill you."

Earl put on his coat and hat. He checked his .38 revolver and replaced it in its holster.

The boy, now. It had been nice having a boy around the last few years. He and Alice, they'd had one child — a boy, too — but he was killed in the war, just before Alice died. Bobby had become like a grandson.

Some day, Earl thought, I'll give the boy that .45 Colt — when he's old enough to handle it without hurting himself, of course. The boy sure loved that Colt.

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Well, time to get going.

Earl closed his front door and locked it. He put the key in his pocket and sighed.

He didn't like this assignment. Probably, Mrs. Parker was all worked up about nothing.

True, Luke Catline was a mean man. He came from somewhere in the South during the war to work in a factory. One summer he went back and returned with a wife, Sally, a tiny girl, not especially pretty or intelligent, but kind and soft-spoken. He bought an old house in Sunset — the old Browning place — and worked off and on at the factory and ran a small farm.

Luke wasn't like the other people in Sunset. He kept to himself, formed no friendships, didn't even go to church. He remained aloof, a tall, lean, dark man in old clothes, and he always needed a shave and usually smelled of whiskey.

The trouble with Luke was, he took things so serious. Like the time he was sent to the penal farm. Luke didn't want to go. He had to be dragged from the jail into the station wagon. He was clean out of his head.

And now Earl remembered what Luke had said that day: that he'd kill the next man who tried to take him.

Did he mean that? Well, with a man like Luke Catline, you couldn't be sure. Especially if the man got drunk. And Luke was drunk tonight.

Earl began walking down the road toward the Catline place.

Luke said, "Stand still, Sally. I think I heard something."

"Now, Luke . . ."

"Shut up, shut up, and stand still!"

"Yes, Luke."

He listened intently. Then he grinned.

"Someone's on the road," he said. "Someone just turned into our driveway. Someone's walking this way."

"You're imagining things, Luke."

"No, I ain't. Someone's really comin' — comin' this way."

He hoisted the gun from his lap, aimed it at the door.

"Luke, Luke . . ."

"Gawd, shut up! Get over in back against the wall. Keep your mouth closed. If anybody says anything, you let me do the talking. You do as I say, Sally!"

The Catline house was a good hundred yards off the road. Earl saw the lights ablaze as he turned in the rough dirt driveway.

The place had deteriorated since Luke Catline had acquired it. The grass was high, the road was in bad shape, the fence and house needed repairs, the yard was littered with junk. Not that this piece of property had ever been much to begin with.

It was a cool, clear night. Earl moved as quietly as he could among the shadows. Except for the crickets, the only sound was the faraway drone of a television set in the Worthington house across the road.

Well, there was no noise from the Catline house, that was for sure. If

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the place hadn't been lit up, it would have been easy to assume that all the occupants had gone to sleep and Mrs. Parker's fears were unfounded.

But absence of sound, of course, could mean many things, and not all of them good.

Earl was at the front steps now. He ascended them, and strode across the porch. Still no sound from inside.

Earl waited a moment. He took a deep breath, wondering if what he was about to do was worth the two hundred dollars a month the county paid him. Then he rapped.

"Who is it?"

That was Luke Catline's drawling voice. Luke sounded — well, not quite all right.

"It's Earl Andrews, Luke."

"What you want?"

"Want to talk to you."

"What about, Earl?"

"Can't we talk inside, Luke? I think it'd be better if we talked inside."

A pause.

"I'd rather not."

"I think we'd better," Earl persisted.

"Got a warrant?"

"No, but I can get one. Not that I think I need one, but I can get it."

Another pause.

"All right, Earl. You come right on in, then."

Earl began to open the door. As it swung back, Sally Catline screamed: "He'll kill you!"

Earl dived for the floor the moment Luke let go with one barrel of the shotgun. Earl felt the shot tearing at his left arm, but his right hand was free, and as he sprawled on the floor he pulled his revolver from its holster and began firing.

Then Luke let go with the other barrel.

People and cars filled the Catlines' front yard. On the front porch, the sheriff was talking to a reporter from a newspaper in a neighboring county.

"That's right," the sheriff said. "A-n-d-r-e-w-s. He was fifty-six. The second blast got him in the chest and he died instantly."

"And Catline's in the hospital?"

"He's in the hospital," the sheriff said, "but he's not expected to live."

The sheriff shook his head.

"Funny thing. He wasn't exactly a real deputy, you know. He was the day turnkey at the jail, really. We never sent him out on anything. But he'd lived in Sunset all his life, and he'd told everyone around here he was a deputy. I don't think he'd ever fired that .38 he carried around in his holster — not before today, I mean. We let him handle a few traffic accidents and settle some minor disputes out here, that's all. We never figured he'd run into this . . ."

The sheriff's attention was distracted for a moment by a small boy who had come up the porch steps and who now stood staring at the covered figure on the floor of the room.

"Somebody get that kid out of here," the sheriff ordered. "Lord knows, this is no place for a kid . . ."

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

and another fine original for our* Black Mask *section

Ray Chesson's "Last Swap" is one of the twenty-two "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Eleventh Annual Contest. The story takes place mostly in a wild, primitive part of the United States — the perfect background for the wild and primitive characters Mr. Chesson writes about; for, as you will learn for yourself, this is a hard, tough, brutal tale about two of the most evil blackguards you have ever met in print. And yet, as you will also learn, the locales, the nature details, the geographic descriptions are so authentic that they hurt — and at times poetically so, even against as sordid a slice of life as a young girl with a broken nose and a lost, puzzled look in her eyes ever cut for herself. You won't forget this story for a long time . . .

The author knows his nature and geography first-hand. While "Last Swap" is Ray Chesson's first fiction, he has sold articles to "Field and Stream," "Outdoor Life," "Sports Afield," and other outdoor magazines. Mr. Chesson is in his late forties. He was born in North Carolina, in the swamp country, and has lived from New York to San Francisco. In his colorful career, he has been a farmer, a hunter and trapper, the owner of a country store, a commercial fisherman and a commercial artist; he has also been a production foreman, a job analyst (which is not surprising!), has worked for a detective agency in New Orleans, and manned a fire lookout station in the high Sierras. And what do you think he was doing at the time he wrote "Last Swap"? He was living in Arizona and eating black bass from the Colorado River.

In a phrase, Ray Chesson knows his stuff. But don't merely take our word for it: just read his first story . . .

LAST SWAP

by RAY CHESSON

I WAS IN TOPOCK, ARIZONA, WHEN I ran across this girl with a broken nose and a jackknife in a shoebox. It had been a lean winter in the jungle, up at Las Vegas, and I had moved south to hustle a few bucks from a character called Muleface Morton. But I wasn't having any luck. Be-

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cause you just can't hustle Morton unless you've got an ace in the hole, and I didn't have that ace. Not until I found the girl.

This was in February and Morton was camping among the smoke trees in a drywash near the Colorado River, a couple of miles north of Topock. He had a contract to rope wild burros for a dog food cannery at ten dollars a head, and when I heard the news I figured he had hit the jackpot and the time was ripe for settling an old score. So I left Las Vegas and pulled my '41 sedan into his camp one morning around sunrise.

He was living in a homemade trailer with the back end busted out. I sat in my car and looked at him while he stood in the trailer door and pretended he didn't know me.

"Well, Muleface," I said, "I heard about your good fortune, and I happened to think . . ."

"If," he interrupted, "you happened to think to put the lug on me for my burro money, then you wasted whatever gasoline you stole to get here."

I hadn't seen him for eight months but he was still the same old refugee from a wash basin. His face was so dirty it looked like a smoked ham, and if I hadn't known it was Morton I was smelling I would have sworn I had just run over a skunk. I rolled a smoke, got out of the car, and walked toward him.

"Seems like I recall a time when you were friendlier," I reminded him. "A time when we worked together, trading wornout range horses through central Nevada."

"That was last summer," he said. "Them days are gone."

"I also recall how you pulled out in your stake truck one night while I was asleep, and after you were gone I noticed that the battery was missing out of my car. Likewise a few other things that could be traded off along the way."

"That's a shame," he said. "You ought to keep a closer watch on your stuff."

We stood and looked at each other and I could see I wasn't getting anywhere, so I said, "All right, let's forget it." Then I told him I had noticed a spare horse in his corral, up the wash, and it occurred to me that he might be able to use a good roper in his burro business.

But he didn't have a saddle for the extra horse. He said I'd have to ride bareback, so I could only chase the burros into a box canyon and he'd still have to do all the roping. For that my pay would be my grub and one sack of tobacco a day.

I said, "If you expect me to get out there in the desert and run burros over the baldheaded mountains for no more than my keep, you're even sillier than you look."

He got sore, his face turned purple, and he commenced to scratch and spit. He had a week's growth of unwashed whiskers and his bald spot was so filthy it looked like a desert rock in the morning sun.

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He said, "Get yourself a damn saddle so you can do your end of the roping and I might cut you in for a fourth."

I told him it wasn't enough.

"Then furnish your own horse to go with that saddle you haven't got and we'll split it down the middle."

I started toward my car and he asked where I was going.

"Topock," I said. "I'm going to have a beer while I wait for the opportunity to knock. One way or another I'll trade myself into a horse and saddle."

A blue car with an aerial on the back had pulled off the road and was creeping up the wash. It stopped some distance away and the driver sat and looked at the camp.

I turned and said to Morton, "Who's your visitor?"

"Deputy sheriff from Gold Road," he answered.

"Yeah?"

"Odd sort of fellow," Morton said. "Got a reputation for smelling out trouble that's getting ready to happen."

"Well?"

"So now I'm wondering what he smells around here."

"Probably you," I said, and went on to my car. When I drove past the deputy he smiled slightly. I swung south on the road and when I looked back, he was still watching the camp. And Morton was still standing in his trailer door.

Maybe you've been through Topock. It's on U.S. 66. Just a post office, a restaurant, and a grocery store, snuggling up against the Santa Fe tracks across the river from Needles, California. Home to a handful of gandy dancers, and a scattering of old-age pensioners squatting in the mesquite. There are better places to wait for opportunity to knock, but I was short on gasoline, so I went in the store, ordered my beer, and commenced to search my memory for a fast shuffle somebody had pulled on me in a past trade.

I remembered how, once, over in Death Valley, a fellow named Sluffy had an extra woman on his hands and how he traded her to Muleface Morton for five dollars and a set of spark plugs. She was a big, flat-faced woman, always hungry, and Morton soon got tired of feeding her. One day, when he was passing through Virginia City, he swapped her off for a saddle. It's strange how I happened to be thinking about that and just at that minute this girl came in — the girl with the broken nose.

She was slim, and maybe seventeen years old. She wore a cheap dress and no stockings, and had a lost, puzzled look in her eyes — like a baby kit fox hiding in the arrow weed after you've just shot its mama.

She came up to the counter and asked, "What's the best way to get to Arkansas?"

The clerk said, "I don't know. Never went to Arkansas."

I said, "Me, I'd take the southern route. I'd stay right on 66 and keep driving until . . ."

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"I'm not driving," she said. "I'm hitch-hiking."

All the luggage she had was one old cardboard shoebox. She took the lid off, fished around through some panties and things, and pulled out a leather change purse.

She said to the clerk, "I'd like to buy a jackknife."

When she opened the purse I saw four one-dollar bills and some quarters and nickels, and I knew that opportunity was beginning to knock. I thought of a fellow called Swede, up in Nevada, who had a saddle he didn't need and needed a woman he didn't have.

So I said, "Since you're hitching you ought to go to Las Vegas and take the northern route through Salt Lake City. That way there wouldn't be so much desert to cross."

The clerk put the jackknife on the counter and turned to me. "Salt Lake City?" he said. "Why, she'd freeze to death, and her without a coat!"

Always somebody trying to throw a monkey wrench in the works.

I said, "Listen, buster, I just came in from Salt Lake City, and all the way through Utah the people are going around with their sleeves rolled up. And even the flowers are blooming."

"In February?" He shook his head. "I'll find a newspaper. That'll give the temperature all over the country. There ought to be a newspaper around here some place. . . ."

The girl had listened to this and was now uncertain. She opened her knife and tested the blade on her thumb. She asked, "Are the flowers really blooming in Utah?"

"I wouldn't lie to you," I said.

"Well," — after a moment — "if I go that way how will I get to Las Vegas?"

I told her the shortest way was to cross the river to Needles and take the road through Searchlight. "It's a long trip," I said, "and lonesome country, and not much chance of picking up a ride."

"I wouldn't like that," she decided.

"No," I said, "you'd probably get stuck in the sagebrush with the coyotes all night . . . and I'd hate to think I caused that to happen to you. So I'll tell you what I'll do. You buy three dollars worth of gas for the car and I'll drive you to Las Vegas."

She was still fooling with the knife. "This morning," she said, "a fellow gave me a ride and he got fresh." She looked up at me. "Next fellow lays a hand on me I'm going to cut his throat from one ear to the other." She closed the knife and put it in the shoebox. "Where do you want to get the gas?"

"Over the river," I said, and when we went out the door, the clerk was tearing the store apart, trying to find a newspaper.

We crossed into California and headed north to Nevada, driving along slowly, without talking, on into the blue shadows of afternoon — silently through the empty land, between the thirsty mountains, and

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eventually up from the desert floor and into the joshua trees; then we were in Searchlight with its abandoned mines and more gambling houses than eating places. We went through and sloped down into the valley beyond.

The girl had seemed to be asleep, but suddenly she asked in a low, thoughtful voice, "Did you ever go back home, knowing that even while your folks were being glad to see you they'd wonder where they would get the extra money to feed you?"

I was gauging my speed to hit Las Vegas after dark, and planning what I would do with her after I got there. When I didn't answer right away she asked again:

"Did you?"

I tried to remember when I'd had a home. There had been one, once, when I was a kid — a miner's shack near Rhyolite, east of the Funerals, in the Amargosa Desert. Hot brassy mountains where they dug out the rich green bull frog ore, speckled with yellow gold. Where a Panamint Indian made a million-dollar strike and sold out for a pair of overalls.

But the gold was long gone when I lived there.

"No," I told her, "I never went back."

"Well," she said, "I don't know where else to go. Not since the accident."

Scattered dust devils were coming alive in the sagebrush, and I searched the sky for wind clouds.

"Accident?" I said. "Where?"

"In the mountains."

I knew that if the wind would blow it would make it easier to handle her.

"How did it happen?" I asked.

"We were driving in the night and there was snow on the road. And ice. And that's when I lost my coat and everything, and my nose got broke."

"Who was with you?"

"My husband."

The sun was setting and cloud streamers were forming high in the northwest, so I knew that the wind was going to blow. A sudden cold gust rocked the car and the girl pulled her dress collar close about her throat.

She said, "When we got married we came out west to make a little money. Thought to pick cotton and lettuce and stuff. But we didn't get to pick anything before it happened. So now I'm going back home."

"Where's your husband?"

"It was a funny thing about him. After the car stopped turning over he crawled out and said, 'Well, it seems like I got a clean white sheet to sleep on tonight.' And he laid down on the snow and died."

We drove on into the dusk while the wind grew stronger and colder, and presently it was night. Not long after that we reached the outskirts of Las Vegas.

Mesquite whipped wildly beside the road and dust fogged thick in the headlights, while empty beer cans clattered by on the pavement and discarded liquor cartons blew away from the roadside bars and flapped toward us like big pale birds with

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crippled wings. It was a pretty good blow.

I said, "This is getting rough, and it's going to get rougher. I'm worried about you hitting the road on a night like this."

She hunched her shoulders against the cold and commenced to shiver.

I said, "Not far from here there's a little spread belongs to a fellow called Swede. You'd better spend the night there."

She shook her head.

"It's the only thing to do," I argued. "There's an old covered wagon behind the kitchen, with a cot in it. You can sleep there and I'll stick around to see that nothing happens to you."

She didn't answer. So when we got to Charleston Boulevard I turned east toward Sunrise Mountain and the lights of the city fell away behind us.

After a while there was a narrow, wheel-rutted lane that twisted through a tamarac jungle, and then suddenly we were at Swede's shack. We got out, the girl carrying her shoebox, and pushed through a pack of howling, whining dogs. The door opened and Swede waited, squat and heavy against the smoky glow of the lantern on the kitchen table. Even before we were inside I could see the saddle hanging on the wall.

He's a bushy-headed man, Swede, with little pig eyes set close together in a red face. Picks up a living swamping in the skidrow bars, and in his spare time he gathers old bathtubs and busted water heaters and sun-warped boards out at the city dump and hauls the mess home in his truck, piling it wherever he happens to stop. With visions of using the junk to build a tourist court some day — out by Sunrise Mountain where the city's sewer ditches run wide open — and no tourist ever goes.

He was fixing supper when we got there, so he set places for us and stared at the girl while she picked nervously at her food. When she was through I hurried her out to the wagon and left her standing beside the cot, holding on to her shoebox as if that jackknife was all that stood between her and Eternity. I went back to make my pitch for the saddle.

"Swede," I said, "I've got woman trouble."

We sat at the table, just the two of us, while the wind howled in the eaves and the dogs howled in the night. It was already plain that Swede was interested in my trouble.

"Where'd you get her?" he asked.

"Advertised."

"Oh. I never had much luck like that."

He had advertised twice for a wife. Thought it would be cheaper than hiring a night clerk after he got his tourist court built.

"You advertised in the wrong place," I said. "You got west coast city women who thought they were coming to Nevada to marry a Las Vegas millionaire."

There had been five of them. When they saw Swede they decided to answer some other advertisement.

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"Where'd this girl come from?" he asked.

"Back east. Arkansas farm girl."

"What happened to her nose?"

"Accident," I said. "She was coming out by bus and the driver dozed off and hit a freight train. Insurance people are going to settle for fifteen hundred dollars as soon as she signs the papers."

"*What?*"

"Fifteen hundred."

"Well, I'll swear!"

I knew I had Swede hooked.

"But the money won't do me any damn good," I said, "because I can't marry her."

He wondered why, and I said, "While I was waiting for her to get out here I did some drinking and when I sobered up I was married to a hash slinger from Yuma."

"You don't say!"

"So now this girl shows up and I'm trying to hide her from my wife."

His little mind explored the possibilities. "What are you going to do with her?"

"Haven't decided."

He stared thoughtfully at the grease-filled cracks in the old enameled table "Would it help if I took her off your hands?"

"There's a hitch to it," I told him.

He was instantly wary.

"I paid her way out west," I said, "and I'm entitled to something in return."

"Oh."

"Not money, necessarily. I'd as soon make a trade."

His pig eyes narrowed slyly. "A bathtub, maybe? A heater?"

"No." I glanced casually about the room, and eventually up at the saddle. "How about that?" — motioning with my hand.

"The saddle?"

I nodded.

He frowned and drummed his fingers on the table. The saddle was his grandest possession. He didn't have a horse, but he liked to call his place a ranch, and that saddle made it seem authentic. But he wanted the fifteen hundred, too.

"All right," he decided finally. "It's a trade."

I got up and lifted the saddle from its peg. "I'll sleep in the car tonight," I said, "and we'll all get together for breakfast and tell the girl about it."

He was still drumming on the table. "Just remember," he warned, "that if she turns me down, that saddle goes back on the kitchen wall."

"Sure," I told him. "You know I'll treat you square."

I went out the door, and that's the last I ever saw of Swede.

While waiting for him to go to bed I drained the gas from his truck and put it in my tank. Then I checked my tires. They were badly worn and I didn't have a spare — only an old casing to cut up for blowout patches. After that I rolled a smoke and planned how to get the girl back to Topock where I could trade her to Morton for one of his horses. When the light went out in the shack I started toward the wagon.

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I had climbed up through the back and was just inside and still on my hands and knees when the girl tried to knife me. It was a surprise, because I thought she had bought that knife only for a bluff.

The blade creased my head an inch above the left ear, and before she could try again I was on my feet and had her by the wrists, holding her close in the dark, feeling her body tremble. She never had undressed, not even her shoes.

"All right," I said, "you needn't try to scalp me! I only came to save you."

"Save me?" — in a thin, scared voice.

"From Swede."

"Swede?"

"Pull yourself together and listen," I told her. "You're in danger and you've got to get out of here."

"Turn me loose," she said, trying to bite my arm.

I shook her until she stopped fighting, and then I said, "Now pay attention to what I'm saying. You're in trouble. There are things you don't know about Swede. He once did fifteen years in a nut house for beating a woman almost to death just to hear her scream. Maybe you remember how he was watching you in the kitchen tonight. Well, he was getting ideas. And now he's hiding out there behind a lumber pile with a piece of pipe in his hands, waiting for a chance to get at you."

"Turn me loose!" she said again.

I took the knife from her fingers and tossed it out into the yard. Then I let her go and she backed away toward the cot.

I said, "You'll have to go back to Topock. It wouldn't be safe to hitch the Salt Lake highway now, because he'd get in his truck and catch you."

The wagon rocked in the wind and the canvas top flapped like pistol shots. I let it all sink in, then I said, "Well, stay if you like, but you'll face Swede alone because I'm clearing out. I hope you live to see Arkansas again."

I jumped down from the wagon and started toward the car, and I could feel the blood trickling out of my hair and clotting on the side of my face. Before I had gone twenty feet she was trotting at my side, shoebox in her hand. But there wasn't any jackknife in the box — not any more.

We slept in the car, parked in the desert a few miles south of Las Vegas. In the morning the sky was pale yellow through the dust, and the wind was blowing harder. We headed for Topock, leisurely, and stopped in Searchlight to buy sandwiches with what money the girl had left. That's when I found out they were looking for me.

I had stopped the car in front of a restaurant and left the girl sitting in it. When I went inside and gave my order the fellow behind the counter seemed overly curious about the dried blood on my face; so after a minute I went to the rest room and washed it off. There was a long scab in my hair, but that didn't show.

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I went back to the counter and the fellow said, "You have a little trouble? Maybe up around Vegas?"

I shook my head. "No trouble. Just go ahead and fix the sandwiches."

"Thought you might be that bird they're after," — talking while he worked.

"What bird?"

"Law was in here. Said some joker out at Sunrise Mountain reported he traded a saddle for a wife, but she took off with the bird who traded her. Law said if they catch the bird and find out he transported the woman over a state line . . ."

"Just put the sandwiches in a bag," I said.

He looked up, unhurried. "You'll know the woman if you see her. She's got a broken nose." Then glancing through the front window, he added, "Just like that chick out there in your car."

"Never mind the bag," I told him. "Give me the damn sandwiches like they are."

We left Searchlight with the accelerator down to the floor and the tappets chattering under the hood.

But the girl guessed something was wrong, and she asked, "What happened back there?"

So I told her the police were after her.

"Why?"

"Don't know," I said. "Maybe Swede turned you in."

"But I haven't done anything!"

I told her that didn't matter. She was broke and had no job, and if they picked her up she'd get vagged. Her folks would be notified and she'd be disgraced.

Her face twisted up and she commenced to cry. "How did I get in a mess like this?" she kept saying over and over again. After that I didn't have to worry about anybody seeing her. She ducked and hid every time we passed another car.

It didn't seem wise to go back by way of Needles, so I took the Davis Dam turnoff, crossed the river to Arizona, and then on through Bullhead City. I felt safe now, traveling the washboard road that led to Topock past Muleface Morton's camp, driving slowly in a great, billowing cloud of dust.

Along here the river was a huge silver snake, squirming south to Mexico, spreading wide to coil and rest in the brush-choked valley . . . where wild horses and burros followed the alluvial fans down from the mountains to water, and beavers built their houses in the tule marsh. We drove slowly through the wild, primitive country, and we weren't far from Morton's camp when one of the tires went flat.

I was cutting a blowout patch from the old spare casing when I saw the dust cloud on the road behind us.

The girl was waiting in the car and I opened the door and told her somebody was coming. "You'd better get out and hide in the mesquite," — and she was gone before the car even took form in the dust.

It was the Gold Road deputy. He

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pulled up and asked in a soft, friendly voice, "Need any help?"

I told him no, that I'd be finished in a few minutes.

He asked, "What's that thing you're using to cut the casing?"

I told him it was just one of my tools — an old file I had ground down into a knife.

"Well," he said, "it's a good knife for a murder. There wouldn't be any prints on the handle." The handle was a strip of felt, wrapped and tied.

I looked up at him, but he was smiling, and I knew that he hadn't heard about that wife peddling deal at Sunrise Mountain — or if he had, he didn't have me connected with it yet.

He said, "Are you on your way to the burro camp?"

I nodded and went on with my work.

He asked, "Is Morton a friend of yours?"

I remembered the interest he seemed to be taking in Morton and I wondered if he was after the old goat for something.

So I said, "No, not exactly." And thinking it best to go on record a bit stronger, I added, "As a matter of fact, I don't like Morton. We had a little beef over a battery and a few other things."

He sat there another moment, then said, "Well, I'll be seeing you." And he drove away, following his dust cloud toward Topock.

I finished with the tire and threw the tools on the back seat. Then I called the girl out of hiding. It was almost sunset when we got to the burro camp.

Morton was up by the corral when I parked near the trailer. "Topock," I said to the girl, "is on down the road, but you can't go now because the deputy went that way. So you'll have to sleep in the car again tonight. But you'd better start out before dawn, so you can hitch a ride before the store opens and somebody sees you."

"How will I get there?" she asked.

"Walk," I said. "It's not very far."

She was staring through the smoke trees at Morton. "Will the car doors lock?"

"Sure," I lied. "Just push the buttons down."

"I'm sorry I didn't get to see the flowers blooming in Utah," she said. She got out of the car and stretched. "I think I'll climb up to the rim of the wash and watch the sun go down."

I left her and walked toward the corral.

Morton barely noticed me when I came up. He had caught sight of the girl and was leaning against the corral, watching her as if he hadn't seen a woman in fifteen years.

She had climbed to the rim and the last blaze of the sun was on her face while she looked across the river toward the California mountains. I suppose she was remembering all the big things she and her cotton-picking husband had planned to do when they came west, before their luck ran out.

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The wind molded her dress against her body and she stood small and young against the desert sky, and after a few minutes seeing her that way Morton was no trouble at all. I traded her for one of Morton's horses.

But I knew there'd be trouble when the girl disappeared.

So, just to make sure he wouldn't learn that he had been cold-decked before she had a chance to clear out, I said, "There's one thing . . ."

"What?" he asked.

"Don't bother her tonight. Let her sleep in the car, alone."

"Why?"

"Because she's only a kid. If you scare the hell out of her, there's no telling what she might do."

"She'll do all right," he said, "or I'll feed her heart to the buzzards."

The sun was down and dusk was a violet haze floating on the wind.

"Just don't bother her tonight," I told him again.

"Okay," he said, and he left the corral and walked to his trailer. After he was inside I got my bedroll and saddle and laid them out on the ground, using the saddle for a pillow. When I finally went to sleep the girl was in the car.

I didn't hear the deputy when he drove in. He must have come around dawn because the sun wasn't up yet when I awoke, and there he was, sitting on his heels, watching me.

"There's blood on your face," he said in his soft, easy voice. "Maybe you'd like to tell me about it."

I touched my head where the girl had cut me. The saddle had rubbed the scab off during the night. I got up and looked around. The wind was gone now, and everything seemed quiet. I decided that Morton was still asleep, but I didn't know whether the girl had left or not.

I rolled a smoke and said, "What's on your mind, officer?"

"Now don't tell me you don't remember."

I shook my head.

"Well, Muleface Morton is over there in your car with his throat cut from one ear to the other."

"*What?*"

"And your felt-handle knife is still sticking in his neck."

"Wait a minute!" I yelled.

"So it appears that you've settled that beef you had with Morton."

"Get the girl!" I told him. "Get that durn girl!"

But he only sat on his heels and smiled. "What girl?" he asked.

Because she had got away clean — there was not a trace of her left in the burro camp. Even her tracks had been covered by the wind before it had died down in the night.

So I can't prove she was there, and I never learned her name. Or where she came from in Arkansas. And when I keep telling the sheriff to trace her through the accident she had in the mountains, he asks which mountains? — and I don't know. I don't even know which state.

All I know for sure is that I finally traded myself into one hell of a mess.

And it looks like my last swap.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Larry Van Benthuysen's "The Clementine Caper" is one of the twenty-two "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Eleventh Annual Contest. It is a mighty "cute" yarn, completely off-trail, and with charm and chuckles all its own . . . At the time he wrote "The Clementine Caper," the author was 30 years old, married, and had one son, a shaver of three. Mr. Van Benthuysen was graduated in 1951 from the University of Vermont where he served as poetry editor, and later as editor-in-chief, of the college's literary magazine. He is now back at the University of Vermont, but as an assistant in public relations, his chief duties being to write press and radio releases. Between graduation and return to the University, Mr. Van Benthuysen was a reporter and general utility editorial infielder on a small Vermont daily newspaper.

So you can see where Mr. Van B. is headed — for a writing career, part-time in the beginning, full-time perhaps in the future. Actually, he has been writing short stories since his high school days back in Yonkers, New York. He has some nice-looking and nice-sounding rejection slips, but the "honor spot" in his collection of communications from magazines is the letter he received from EQMM informing him that he had made his first literary sale. It gave him, to quote Mr. Van B., "a real boost." Well, EQMM has made no secret of the way it feels: we are always ready, willing, and able to be godfather (and on occasion, midwife, to mix more than our metaphors!) to a new writer's first-published story.

THE CLEMENTINE CAPER

by LARRY VAN BENTHUYSEN

IT WAS JUST AN OBSCURE ITEM, buried on an inside page, but it caught my eye the way obscure items sometimes do; and since it was short I read it over a second time even though I'd heard Alice call to say I could come "*any* time now" to dry the supper dishes.

The item was headed *Skeleton Unearthed.* A smaller subhead added *Uranium Hunter in Grim Find.* The item bore a Foaming Brine, Montana, dateline, and read as follows:

> A weekend uranium hunter stumbled on to what appeared to be a gold-rush murder case. It must have taken place in an old cavern

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near this small town where, over 100 years ago, prospectors hunted gold following rumors of a rich strike.

Sam Smith of Foaming Brine was hunting a richer mineral — uranium — on Sunday when he unearthed a small cavern in an out-of-the-way canyon that had long been blocked off by rocks. Inside the cavern, Smith discovered the skeleton of a young man with a miner's pickax buried in his skull.

Authorities claim the skeleton to be very old — "possibly over 100 years" — and credited the high state of preservation to the fact that the cavern had been sealed off many years ago.

Preliminary investigations indicated the cavern might also hold a rich gold deposit . . .

That's all there was to it, I put the paper down, speculating on the item, when my wife called again. "George, I said you could come *now* if you want to."

"Yes, honey," I replied, and went into the kitchen.

"What took you so long?"

"I was reading a story in the paper about this guy out West who was hunting uranium and discovered a murder committed maybe a hundred years ago."

"How did he do that?" she asked. So I told her the story the way it was reported in the paper, and she shook her head — which meant that she understood something which she didn't understand. You have to be a husband to recognize these things.

"Imagine that," she said.

"Yeah," I started to hum in self-defense. "In a cavern, in a canyon, excavating for a mine . . . dwelt a miner, a forty-niner, and his daughter, Clementine."

"What's that you're singing?" my wife asked. Ordinarily she never noticed my singing.

"Why, I guess it's *Clementine*," I said. "I wasn't really aware that I was singing."

"Sing it again."

"I didn't sing it once yet!"

"Sing it already," she said.

"All right," I agreed, feeling self-conscious. "In a cavern, in a canyon, excavating for a mine . . . dwelt a miner, a forty-niner, and his daughter, Clementine."

"Keep going."

"Oh, my darling, oh, my darling, oh, my darling Clementine, you are lost and gone forever, dreadful sorry, Clementine . . ."

I hesitated and Alice nodded her head affirmatively. "More."

"Mm, let's see. It goes . . . oh, yes . . . drove she ducklings to the water every morning just at nine, hit her toe against a boulder, fell into the foaming brine. Oh, my —"

"Stop! Stop right there," Alice waved a wet hand in front of my face like a policeman with dishpan hands.

"What's got into you?" I asked.

"Doesn't something about that last verse strike you as funny?"

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"Well—"

"Don't you think there's something funny when a girl who drives her ducklings to the water every morning just at nine hits her toe against a boulder that's been there every single morning?"

"Well, it's just a song . . ."

"What comes next?"

"Something like . . . oh, my darling, oh, my darling, oh, my darling Clementine, you are lost and gone forever, dreadfulsorryClementine."

"Stop running it together. Keep singing."

"You asked for it . . . Ruby lips above the water blowing bubbles soft and fine, but alas I was no swimmer, dreadful sorry, Clementine."

"Aha!" Alice chortled, shaking her still-damp fist at me. "But alas, *who* was no swimmer?" she asked, beginning to sound like a district attorney on a sly track.

"What do you mean, *who* was no swimmer? Whoever's singing the song was no swimmer, I guess."

"You guess right," she said smugly. "And that's the same guy who sings all those phony 'oh, my darling Clementines.' "

I tossed my towel over my left shoulder, and retreated one step backward from my wife's outstretched and menacing forefinger. "Are you suggesting that there is more here than meets the ear?" I asked.

She nodded, and I braced myself mentally. "You've been reading too many mystery stories."

"Here," she offered, smiling sympathetically. "Let's sit down and I'll analyze it for you." She pulled out a chair and I sat down, ignoring her scowl as she found a chair across the table from me.

"We are going to go over it for the facts, is that it, ma'am?"

"You are with it," she said. "On the surface, what do we have?"

"Well," I said, trying to look thoughtful, "we have one drowned maiden and one sorry lover."

"That's just the point. Do we have a sorry lover, or do we have a villain just pretending to be sorry to throw us off the scent?"

I smiled blandly, the way Charlie Chan used to. "Boy," I said, "that's the last martini you get before supper."

Alice ignored me. "Clown if you want to, but frankly I think I've got something here."

"I won't tell if you won't. We could seal our silence in a pact of blood."

"Never mind that. Try singing the rest of the song."

"Where did I leave off?"

"Dreadful sorry. Right after 'but alas I was no swimmer.' "

"Okay. Let me see. I'm not sure whether this next verse is legitimate or not, but we used to sing it in college."

"Is it clean?"

"Of course," I said.

"Well, sing it then."

I plunged into song, wondering what the neighbors were thinking. "Came the Boy Scouts to the rescue

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in their uniforms so fine, artificial respiration couldn't save poor Clementine. Oh, my darling — and so on."

"That clinches it," Alice gave the table a small illustrative smack with her round fist.

I gave the table a mock pound with my big fat fist. "What clinches what?" I asked.

"Clementine was murdered," Alice smiled when she said it.

I just looked at her for a minute. Finally I said, "That's even the last martini *I* get before supper."

"George, listen. Clementine was murdered and I can prove it."

"Do you want me to call Ellery Queen or do you think you can handle this caper yourself?"

"You think you're so funny," she said. "Maybe I *will* write this up and send it to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and become rich and famous and divorce you."

"It might be worth a try at that," I grinned.

"Do you want to hear about it or don't you?"

"I'm hooked," I said.

"All right then. We've established that Clementine didn't *fall* into the foaming brine accidentally. Right?"

"How's that?"

"Well, it just doesn't figure that anyone who follows the same, set routine each morning of her life is suddenly going to stumble and trip over something that's been part of that routine all the time. Right?"

"Okay," I said. "What next?"

"That bit about 'oh, my darling' and 'but alas I was no swimmer, dreadful sorry, Clementine.' "

"What about it?"

"We agree that it is Clementine's lover or supposed lover who is singing the song?"

I nodded.

"And you love me?"

"I don't see what that can possibly have to do with it," I said, "but since I'll be wanting to eat again, let's say that we agree I love you. What does that prove?"

"Well, if I fell into the foaming brine and my ruby lips appeared desperately above the water, what would *you* do?"

"I'd give a great, manly cry and jump in and haul you out by your shell-pink ears."

"But suppose you couldn't swim?"

"But I *can* swim."

"But suppose you *couldn't*?"

"Well, I'd find a pole or a life preserver or something to reach out to you."

"Uh uh," Alice said. "No poles. No nothin'. There's no other way to save me but to jump in after me."

"Duty and breakfast outnumber me," I said. "It seems clear that I would toss caution to the winds, damn the torpedos, and jump in, full steam ahead."

Alice nodded. "Right! That's what any true lover would do. But what does Clementine's lover do?"

"He lets her drown?"

"Exactly," Alice said, "proving that he doesn't love her at all."

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"Sure," I said, the way George Gobel says it.

"Let's sum up," Alice persisted.

"Let's."

"Okay. This is the way I see it," Alice began. "Clementine's false lover hits her on the head with the boulder, throws her in the foaming brine, watches her drown, and then makes up this song to cover himself."

"That sums it up," I said. "Now explain it."

"Well, the murderer made his mistake when he mentioned the boulder — because we can deduce that Clementine did *not* hit her toe against the boulder and fall into the water that way.

"But," she continued with a flourish of her arguing hand, "the murderer did use the boulder to hit Clementine on the head, and because his subconscious mind had a guilt complex about it, he attempted to transfer the blame to the boulder by making up the story about Clementine hitting her toe against it."

"But if Clementine can't swim," I said, "why does the false lover hit her with the boulder? Why doesn't he just toss her into the briny?"

"Because of the Boy Scouts."

"Ah, the Boy Scouts?"

Alice nodded, looking even more smug than before. "Of course. The false lover knows the Boy Scouts' reputation for artificial respiration, so he makes sure that artificial respiration won't be enough to save Clementine even if it comes in time."

"Does the false lover expect the Boy Scouts to show up?" I really didn't expect to stump her.

"Of course. Don't you see, Clementine is in love with the Scoutmaster and the false lover knows this. He also knows that the Scoutmaster takes his troop on a hike every day just so he can have an excuse to visit Clementine."

"I should have known," I said.

"You really should."

"But what about motive?" I asked, not really willing to give in.

"Easy again. Clementine's father had just made a rich strike and the false lover really wants Clementine for her father's gold. When he realizes he can't have Clementine, he kills her, hoping the distraught miner, who has no one else in the world, will adopt him as a son."

"And did he?" I was beginning to feel somewhat like Dr. Watson.

"Why, of course not," Alice said gravely. "Clementine's father wasn't fooled by the story about the rock, and with that as the first clue, he guessed the rest. He approached the false lover, drew a confession from him, and then, in a fit of rage, buried his pickax in the false lover's skull and sealed the body in the cavern where he had, only a few days before, uncovered a rich deposit of gold."

She sat waiting for me to say something, and I just made her wait. Finally I shook my head. "You mean you made all this up just from that newspaper story?"

"The story and the song. What do you think?"

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"I think that's the last time I'll sing for you while I'm doing the dishes," I said, not wanting to admit that I really did think her story was pretty clever at that.

"If you feel that way about it," she said, "I'll remind you that you haven't finished the dishes yet. And while you're finishing, I think I'll go into the study and get to work with the typewriter."

"The typewriter?" I asked, picking up a plate to wipe.

"Sure, the typewriter," Alice said. "I think I *will* send the story to *EQMM*."

Well, if you ask me, she'll never sell such a fantastic yarn to *EQMM*.

EDITORS' NOTE: Well, we guess we'd better not ask you . . . *because she did!*

FOR MYSTERY FANS — these swiftly paced mystery thrillers, all MERCURY PUBLICATIONS are now on sale at your newsstand:

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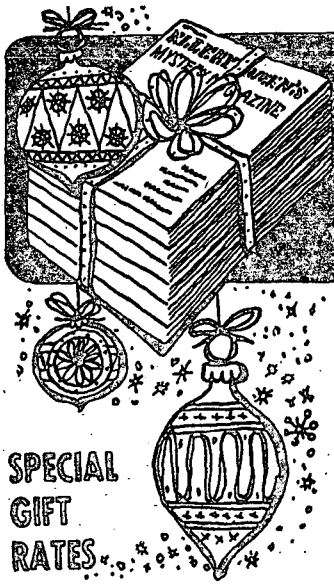

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ROBERT SHERMAN TOWNES**

TITLE: ***Tiger in the Glass***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Boston

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Nathaniel Fogg, dignified, reliable, Yankee-tough family lawyer, belonged to a bygone era: that was why he understood the oldest clue of violence and the oldest blunder of villainy.*

MR. NATHANIEL FOGG, OF THE venerable legal firm of Fogg, Otis & Webb, descended stiffly from his high-roofed old town car. He would not have noticed the two compact little police cars parked in front of Miss Lavinia Westcott's house if they had not forced his chauffeur to draw up three doors away, right in front of the sleazy new apartment building that was bringing to Beacon Hill what the old man charitably called "a different class of people." It certainly never occurred to him to associate the disaster and police cars with Lavinia Westcott's prim, orderly home. With much the ceremony of snuff-taking (at its Regency prime) Mr. Fogg consulted the fat key-wind watch, adorned with a glittering panoply of seal, fob, key, locket, and cigar cutter, that made up the only bit of dash in his somber attire. The honest face of the watch said high noon — Mr. Fogg still used the term. Mr. Fogg moved briskly along the rough-brick sidewalk. One was not late by so much as a few minutes when one lunched with Lavinia Westcott.

Mr. Fogg used the delicate iron railing going up the few steps to the white door: at seventy, even little stairs loom impressively. Mr. Fogg had always loved the white door. Its graceful fanlight and the twin Doric pillars at the sides were a gentle expression of that ruthless Greek maxim which was Lavinia Westcott's rule of life — "*Nothing too much.*" Her ancestors, who had built the house, had

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also learned this motto in their round-hand copybooks; they had carried it all the way through their building, their spending, and their loving. For all his legalistic discipline and his high-top kid shoes, old Nathaniel Fogg sometimes felt that nothing too much might too easily become not quite enough.

He pulled the great brass knocker — there was no electric bell; Miss Westcott did not like them — and was startled when a huge, red-faced man with the unmistakable heft of the plainclothesman opened the door, like a comedy butler.

Mr. Fogg wasted no time on myrmidons. Drawing himself up four-square, fixing the cop with a cold courtroom eye, he said quietly, "Nathaniel Fogg, Miss Westcott's attorney." In his neat mind he was exploring this impossible fact that the two police cars outside did have business in the orderly home and life of his oldest friend and client.

The plainclothesman grunted non-committally and let him into the cool foyer. Everything looked at first as it always had, as it had looked even before Nathaniel Fogg had been born. The curved staircase, the black-and-white marble slabs of the floor, the formal arrangement of hall table and mirror — all suggested the established, the well-made, the well-off.

One thing jarred. The white sliding doors to the front drawing room — Mr. Fogg called it the parlor — were shut tight. Against them, precariously tilted back on one of the priceless Chippendale side chairs borrowed from the dining room, sat a solidly built man in a blue uniform.

Mr. Fogg's guide cocked a furry eyebrow and grunted, "Family lawyer." The uniformed policeman gave Mr. Fogg — and all his profession — a nasty look, got up slowly, and tapped respectfully on the closed doors. They cracked apart secretively; another police face peered out. There were hoarse whisperings, and the doors shut again. Mr. Fogg waited patiently, acquainted of old with "the law's delay." No curiosity was allowed to show on the lean, ascetic face. At length the doors slid open and a handsome man of about 35 years, with a frank, amiable face, strode through and grasped Mr. Fogg's hand as though he had been long awaiting just this meeting.

"Lieutenant Regan," he announced. "I understand you were Miss Westcott's attorney."

"Were, Lieutenant? I am, and —" Mr. Fogg broke off. His thin nostrils tightened; no other sign came through. *Were*. So that was it. Lavinia Westcott was gone, in the spring of her seventieth year, her passing tolled out by a police officer with a casual use of tense. Like Virgil's most heart-breaking line, "*Fuit Ilium*" — Troy was. Lavinia was. Something broke through to the disciplined face.

The lieutenant was contrite. "I'm awfully sorry, sir. I guess I've handed you a shock. Damned clumsy. But I supposed you knew. The family lawyer — coming at this time —"

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"I am here upon the invitation, for luncheon, of Miss Westcott. I know nothing of what has happened; I've been in court all morning."

Lieutenant Regan, reading the old man off to himself, decided at once that he liked him. Mr. Fogg added as an afterthought but with real concern, "What about Julian, Miss Westcott's nephew?"

The police officer indicated the closed drawing room with a curt nod of his head. "Mr. Westcott is in there. We were just running through the formalities. I might as well brief you out here, so he doesn't have to go through it all again. He seems upset.

"This is what seems to have happened. Last night was the regular night out for the only resident servant in the house, an elderly Dutch lady named Mrs. Weymans, sort of housekeeper-cook. She went, as usual, to spend the evening and night with her daughter and son-in-law in Jamaica Plain. Mr. Julian Westcott deposes that he went to bed early, about ten thirty, and slept soundly until he was awakened by the housekeeper, who returned at eight this morning and found Miss Westcott dead at the foot of the stairs to the cellar.

"It seems Miss Westcott had a secret habit of coming down to the kitchen on these Thursday nights and making herself little feasts of all the things, cold meats, pickles, preserves, and the like, that her doctors wouldn't let her have because of her advanced —" Regan broke off, embarrassed.

"Because of her advanced age." Mr. Fogg finished the sentence dryly. "Lavinia was exactly my age, seventy, but her digestion was always delicate. Those orgies were her only vice, and she paid dearly for them."

The lieutenant looked surprised that anyone else had known of the midnight snacks. He went on, "Well, during last night's 'orgy,' she apparently felt the lack of some delicacy kept in the cellar, just under the kitchen. She turned on the light at the head of the steep wooden stairs. That is the last certain fact we know. Somehow, she lost her footing at the top and pitched face-forward to the concrete floor."

Mr. Fogg stood straight as a church candle through the lieutenant's report. Only at the corners of the thin mouth was there a change. Regan added gently, "She died at once. Her neck was snapped — there was no pain."

Mr. Fogg said simply, "Thank you, Lieutenant." Regan had also finished his report to himself on Mr. Fogg. He had noted the expensive clothes not allowed to look too new, the tall collar, high shoes, and slim cane of another time; the shrewd eyes and mouth, and, among the heavy gold and topaz and grosgrain against the waistcoat, a tiny pinchbeck locket no bigger than a thumbnail. He had seen dignity built from within, reliability to both sexes, to friends and society alike, discipline and an old petal of sentiment; above all, toughness, Yankee toughness.

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When they entered the drawing room, Mr. Fogg hurried across to a huge red-leather wing chair by the fireplace. He put forth his hand to a pudgy man of about thirty who sat disconsolately small in a corner of the big chair.

"Julian! My dear boy." He stood beside the chair, one thin hand on the younger man's sloping shoulder. "You must let me handle everything. Don't worry about a thing." The words were business, but Regan could see in the old man's face a warm solicitude far beyond the dry duty of a family lawyer. Regan could understand it; his own impression of Mr. Julian Westcott was that he was likable but pretty weak. Even without Regan's special knack of reading people off, anyone could see that the last of the Westcotts was just not up to it. He would never be the equal of his house, never quite belong in the handsome rooms, with their proud Adam fireplaces, their Chippendale, Goddard, and Sheraton, their Chinese rugs and vases, brought back by just such Yankee Clippers as the model under a full spread of sail in a glass case over the mantel.

Above the clipper model, in unfortunate juxtaposition to Julian, was a Sargent portrait of Lavinia Westcott. Mr. Sargent had evidently liked the pattern of heavily arched brows and straight mouth; this motif of unyielding strength he had used almost raw.

Julian's protuberant blue eyes did not even suggest the cool eyes in the family portraits all about. His face was the same shape as those in wigs and stocks, but there was none of the gritty piety, no hint of the piratical canniness. His small hands lay in his lap like tired white puppies; he spoke in the muted, pale tones of the man who knows nobody is going to listen.

As always, he was oddly overclothed. His suits were bought on his aunt's charge plates and their design had not varied since prep school. They were always bulky, serviceable, with no shoulder padding, no drape whatever. Along with his tight, tall collars, starched cuffs, and snub-nosed shoes, they gave him the bundled-up look of a little boy out sledding.

Lieutenant Regan could see that Julian was drawing strength from the erect old man beside his chair. He made it clear that, since there was no cause to think otherwise, the death could be officially recorded as an accident. Then he took his leave, almost sorry that he would never see this handsome room again.

Waving Julian back to his chair when he rose to accompany the lieutenant to the door, Mr. Fogg took Regan's arm. In the foyer, the cop in the shiny suit was shamefacedly standing beside the borrowed chair while an old lady with a wide peasant face clutched it fiercely. Mrs. Weymans had never before seen such a thing as police in the house, and now she knew she didn't like it. Her eyes seemed to be trying to say something to the lawyer, something not meant for the police. While he was

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puzzling over her signal, Mr. Fogg was surprised to hear a cool note come into Regan's voice.

"By the way, sir, did Miss Westcott have any special reason, any legal business reason, for asking you to lunch today?"

"I have lunched at this house every Friday noon for the past thirty years."

"But you said you had been *invited* —"

"So I had. As I said, I've lunched here on that day at that hour for decades. And every time I have had an invitation. That probably does seem odd to you, Lieutenant; yours is a different time. There was no familiarity about Miss Westcott. Look at her portrait in there." Mr. Fogg was fingering the little pinchbeck locket, a look of faded bitterness in his eyes. "I see the bent of your thought, young man. Miss Westcott was not planning to alter her will by which Julian Westcott inherits everything. She had, in fact, been speaking of late about some wonderful surprise — her words — she was planning for Julian."

Regan fled. That was what one took being a cop; as soon as you made a pleasant connection with somebody, your mind took a turn they couldn't like, and it broke cold.

In the drawing room, Julian had not moved out of his hunched position in the big wing chair. He was staring unhappily into the empty fireplace. As soon as he felt Mr. Fogg enter, he said wistfully, "I wish it were fall — we could have a nice fire."

Mr. Fogg sat down in a smaller chair opposite him. This had been Julian's chair; Lavinia had always sat in the big one. For a while neither spoke.

"I'm hungry, Nathaniel." Julian's thin voice broke across the old man's reveries. He pulled the cord for the housekeeper. "Is — is *she* gone? Have they taken her away? I couldn't eat if she were still lying down there."

Mr. Fogg could not quite define it to himself, but there was a jittery simplicity about Julian that he did not like. Mrs. Weymans came and Mr. Fogg ordered a light lunch. Again the old woman tried to say something with her eyes, red from tears. Clearly the message was not intended for Julian to see. Mr. Fogg felt there would be time enough later to find out what was troubling her. She left angrily, and returned shortly with a lunch of cold chicken and milk. This time her efforts were concentrated on a single intense stare straight into Mr. Fogg's eyes. With an imperceptible flick of his eyelid the old man signaled that he understood and would see her later.

Mr. Fogg ran a finger around the edge of one of the Crown Derby plates. "These were Lavinia's favorites."

"Would you like the whole service, Nathaniel? You may have it. It's mine now, to do with just as I please."

"Thank you, Julian, but wouldn't you rather keep it?"

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"No! I want you to have it. I want you to take it away!"

"Julian, you're very upset. Naturally. You're edgy."

"Edgy? I'm not edgy at all. I never felt better in my life."

"Julian!"

"Shocked, Nathaniel? You oughtn't to be. Surely a lawyer must get to know about people. But all that's neither here nor there. The important thing at the moment is: I want you to sell this house — this house and everything in it. I want you to handle it. I want you to squeeze out every penny you can get. Don't sacrifice for hurry. Take your time, and get me the last red cent."

Mr. Fogg was dumbfounded. It was the longest speech he had ever heard from Julian, the worst he had ever heard from anybody.

"But aren't you going to live on here?"

"You mean because all the Westcotts since *him* —" he jerked a thumb toward the picture of Pilgrim Giles Westcott — "have lived in this city, and most of them in this house? No. I'm going to live in New York."

Mr. Fogg sighed. "Well, Julian, the house is yours to do with as you will — there are no other heirs. And I suppose it *is* your life."

"Yes, Nathaniel, now it is my life."

They picked at the cold chicken in silence. Finally, Julian rested his head back against the chair in a gesture of bored dismissal. Mr. Fogg could find in the sleepy, pudgy face before him none of the shy affability he had known since Julian had come to this house at the age of seven — when his father, already a young widower, had shot himself rather than face the people whose money he had speculated away.

At the door, Mr. Fogg turned. "Don't brood, Julian. Remember, Lavinia was well along." It was easy to say once you tried. "Let me take care of everything. Don't go to the bank for a few days." And he added, without knowing why, "You'll feel better in the morning."

Julian looked sadly about the room. "How empty this room is now! How quiet, even though her embroidery made no noise. Whom will I read the paper to?" He smiled his old familiar shy smile. Mr. Fogg took his leave, loyally telling himself there never had been, was not now, anything secretive about that smile.

He made his way, somewhat against his wishes, to the big kitchen from which his old friend had fallen to her death. At his right was the dark stairway that had swallowed and smashed Lavinia Westcott as she took her only secret pleasure. Lavinia had always preached that error could not escape punishment. There was a pink-luster plaque over her bed that warned THOU GOD SEEST ME.

From this grim thought the old lawyer turned to the tight face of the housekeeper. She was sitting, straight and stern as a judge in a Flemish painting, at a table of sand-scrubbed wood. Her glance was fixed on some point behind the lawyer. But there

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was only the stairway behind him.

Mr. Fogg wanted to comfort the stubborn grief he could see in the wide, simple features, but he had never been adept at consolation. His hand rose instinctively to touch the heavy shoulder, but propriety stood between them and the moment passed. Mr. Fogg made himself look coolly at the staircase.

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Weymans. The stairway. But you mustn't dwell on that."

She shook her head ever so slightly — a motion hardly perceptible, yet almost savage in its very constraint. Again Mr. Fogg followed her gaze. Beside the cellar door there was a small closet just deep enough to hold its array of mops and brooms and other cleaning tools. The door was wide open — an out-of-drawing touch in this room that was always kept so neat. The big room had been cleaned after the police and the doctors left, but the door of this tiny closet stood wide open.

On the floor lay the coils of an incongruously modern vacuum cleaner. Mr. Fogg looked more closely. Nothing. The tight, hurt stare now seemed fixed on the vacuum cleaner's coils. Mr. Fogg bent over. Neatly stacked on the floor were cans and bottles of household cleaning fluids and powders. A cold shiver ran along the old man's ribs. In as long as it takes the heart to catch up on a lost beat, he knew.

The cleaning powder.

In this fanatically neat kitchen a little patch of spilled powder stood out like the beggar at Dives' feast. Barely to be seen in the light film were small, round, dark spots — the marks of bare toes pointing outward toward the kitchen. The oldest clue in the whole arcana of violence — the long discredited footprint. Someone had stood on tip-toe in that shallow closet, facing the kitchen where Lavinia Westcott was making her last "hearty meal." In a patch of scouring powder no bigger than a man's palm were the clear marks of the wings of death.

The lawyer had to meet the old woman's eyes. He wanted to state a case, to make a brief, but he knew he was in a court where judge and jury, counsel and prosecutor, were helpless with love and loyalty. Mr. Fogg consulted his watch and without noting the time, put it back and took his leave.

Julian was not in the drawing room. Mr. Fogg knew he was upstairs in his room lying across the bed, resting. Irresolute, he argued the case. Call Regan: let the police do their paid work; let the great law machinery of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts parse the facts, study, find and punish. But circumstantial evidence had fallen apart countless times in countless courts. Evidence is what a lawyer makes it seem. The faint toeprints were evidence only if one knew this house, its people, the orderly rule of the kitchen — and Julian's past. A puff of breath would blow away the powder, make the surface of all things

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normal again. From this temptation the old man moved sadly away.

Julian's clothing. There lay the body of the evidence. Mr. Fogg knew, with terror and pity in his heart, that if Julian Westcott had stood in the little closet in his bare feet, he had been stark naked. Prove *that* in a Massachusetts court. For silence of movement alone, Julian would have been wearing his lisle socks and his practical felt slippers. Only in a last crisis would he have been barefoot outside his own bathroom.

Lavinia Westcott had worshiped her stern father. He had died in the night, one winter, of a stroke, calling her name. She had been asleep. From then on, she had tortured herself with that one failure. Marriage had been impossible. (Mr. Fogg fingered the pinchbeck locket gently.) When Julian came from the suicide house, she had tried to mold him into an image of her father. Early rising and cold baths ("Hot baths and late sleeping tumbled Rome down" — Mr. Fogg could hear the tart voice), a pony cart at the country place but never a night light ("A Westcott is not afraid"), and always the thick, prudish clothing. Seven generations of hard tradition, and the building of a great republic. Nobody could say it was wrong. Nothing too much — perhaps there lay the flaw. To build you must waste, have extras left over; the republic always had. Perhaps there had not been quite enough for a boy whose father shot himself.

But his motive? What gain? All that Lavinia owned on earth went to Julian, anyway. His simple taste had never seemed in any hurry. His income would have been the same — no sane New Englander ever touches his principal. The interest would flow quietly into the house just as before. The house and its treasure of furnishings, the valuable land on which it stood, were hardly to be thought of as negotiable. Seven generations of tradition. So, then, one must open the mind to a terrible vision of drowned hatred rising up suddenly. Had Lavinia known? Had there been a moment of dreadful summing up? Mr. Fogg shuddered.

A little fact picked at the old man's mind. Of late Lavinia had been hinting about some "wonderful surprise" for Julian. Ever since the teddy-bear days there had been such surprises — Lavinia had never seemed to realize how horribly they failed. The military school, the rigidly supervised trip to Europe with a pair of elderly relatives, the handsome rooms made for him on the third floor of Lavinia Westcott's house, and the house of her fathers, where he was to live his life, and bring a suitable bride chosen for value and worth. No bride had ever come, nor any friends home from military school, nor any of the people at the bank where Julian had been given a token job.

Mr. Fogg made his way up to Julian's rooms. Julian, smiling shyly, let him in. Mr. Fogg did not know what to say now that he was here. His

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mission seemed silly. One could happily slip back to the normal times before today and start all over again. Mr. Fogg said solicitously, "Julian, do you think you ought to stay here for a while? I mean, so soon after —"

Julian looked around him with a sweet smile. "It's all right, Nathaniel. I don't mind at all. I shall have a night light in my room all night long."

Suddenly Mr. Fogg noticed with a shock that two portraits of ancestors and one of Lavinia were missing from the walls. Julian noticed his surprise.

"I took them down. I couldn't bear to have Aunt Lavinia's picture about."

"But the others!"

"They go down to the cellar, and so do all the rest in the house. Daubs, all of them — ugly daubs."

Mr. Fogg sat down heavily in the armchair by the sturdy fireplace. It was afternoon, but the drapes were drawn and the light from the one lamp gave a pleasantly secure feeling to the room. He said, "Why haven't you asked me what I came back for, Julian?"

"It's in your face, Nathaniel. I suppose I knew you would find out. I never got away with anything before — so why now? THOU GOD SEEST ME. How did you find out? Where did I slip up?"

"There were prints of bare toes in a patch of cleaning powder you knocked over when you hid in the closet." Mr. Fogg found that it came as matter-of-factly as a trust case in court — until Julian laughed.

"Oh, Nathaniel! Not a footprint! The oldest blunder of them all! But you want to know why. Well, it was all her own fault. She was preparing a surprise for me. I found out about it when I made my regular inspection of her correspondence while she was at the symphony. You have to be like that if you're going to survive. Not even you, Nathaniel, knew what she was up to.

"She was planning to leave this house to the city. This house and all its appointments was to go to the city as a museum after my death. You know Aunt Lavinia's surprises — they were torture. This one was death."

Mr. Fogg's legal mind swung into gear. "But, Julian, you fool, poor, poor fool. You would have had the house as long as you lived. Such gifts revert only after the death of the first legatee. And you have no children."

Julian waved an impatient hand. "Mince me no law, Nathaniel. I know all that. Of course I have no 'issue,' as you lawyers so bluntly put it. I can't ever have any. You didn't know that, did you, Nathaniel? Aunt Lavinia did. Whenever I went to the doctor, she got a full report. It was ethical enough in this little drop of water where we all live, our class and breed. Maybe it was just as well there could be no children — the stock hasn't been improving, has it? *Has it?*"

Mr. Fogg answered soothingly, "I didn't know about the children,

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Julian. Perhaps that is why Lavinia waited to tell me about the bequest of the house — to save your feelings."

"But don't you see what she was doing?" The younger man's voice was pleading. "She was fixing it so I could *never* get away. I couldn't sell off so much as an embroidery screen all my days. Why this house and its — its things are worth thousands and thousands. I wanted to run away from this perfect house the moment I stepped into it. Now she was arranging my life so I could never run away, not even after she was dead." He sobbed. "I had to stop that, Nathaniel. I had to get away. Oh! I'm sick of being ruled by the dead! I'm sick of the dead!"

His voice was spiraling up to a scream. Mr. Fogg rapped out, "Stop that, Julian! Get a hold on yourself if you want me to hear you out."

"Oh, I want you to hear me out, Nathaniel. I mean that you shall." Julian was behind the chair now. Mr. Fogg could feel the pressure of his body against its high back, smell the tang of his lemon verbena lotion.

"I will tell you just what was done. Last night we sat together in the drawing room and I read her the paper. She said and I said all the same things we always said. At ten thirty she coughed — this was curfew. I am thirty years old, but I kissed her cheek good night and went to bed and put out the lights. There was a fine white moon up. Somehow it made me think of the little clipper ship on the mantel. That will never be for sale. How often I've escaped this house in it!

"But I couldn't escape now. The real things were crowding in. It was an intolerable moment of crisis. There was no way out. I felt at once miserable and wonderfully excited. At eleven thirty I got up, took off my flannel pajamas that Aunt Lavinia gave me last Christmas, and stood stark naked in front of the pier mirror in my room. It was like opening the door to a jungle. You may think, Nathaniel, that I'm a pudgy little fellow with thinning hair and a sagging tummy; but in that glass, I tell you, I saw a tiger, a splendid tiger. The glass when I put my face to it was not cold; it was warm, like a tiger's breath. I felt as though I could walk into the mirror and wait there and send the tiger abroad for me."

Julian was leaning heavily against the back of the chair. Mr. Fogg sat with his head in his hands.

"I was silent on the back stairs. I hid in the broom closet by the cellar door. I didn't notice upsetting the powder. In any kitchen but Mrs. Weymans' it would have made no difference. I was there a long time. Finally Aunt Lavinia came into the kitchen and started one of those sandwiches. None of your 'Nothing too much' there; it impressed the police, even in ruins. I could not see her, but I knew when she started for the cellar. I heard the click of that old-fashioned light switch. I stepped from the closet; she saw me and turned full around.

"I think she knew she was going to

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die. One hand, the one with the cold diamonds, flew to her throat. Even at that hour, alone in the night, she had on her velvet neck ribbon, the little cameo, and a velvet robe that fell about her feet and wrists."

Mr. Fogg realized that something was swinging before his covered face. It was the long, soft cord of Julian's blue dressing gown — practical flannel. Julian had made a slip loop in it and was moving it idly back and forth. That was the world now: Lavinia Westcott meeting life at the top of the cellar stairs, the dreamy swing of the strong cord, the droning voice, the tang of lemon verbena.

"Nathaniel, are you listening? Do you know what Aunt Lavinia said to her killer in the dead of the night? 'Julian Westcott, you march right upstairs and put your clothes on.' Any other time I should have marched. But part of Julian, the easy part, was in the mirror. Lavinia was face to face with the tiger she had tried all her life to avoid. You know what I mean, you loved her once — loved her as a woman before she retired to this convent of pride we Westcotts call home.

"I reached out — gently — and gripped her thin shoulders. I turned her around so that she would fall naturally, face down. She did not struggle — I could sense her terror; it made me angry — I don't know why. Her throat unloosened, she began to scream; that was bad. Something about 'Julian, Julian, you can't' and something else about 'They'll put you in the electrical chair.' I think in that last moment she was worried about the family disgrace of a murder. Just like my father's suicide.

"I pushed just hard enough and she pitched forward down the stairs. She put out one hand backward toward me. Pushing had been easy — the hard part was not taking that hand to save her. That hurt. Terribly. She lay quiet at the foot of the stairs. I didn't have to pad down to see if she were dead. I could tell. I went back to bed, and slept very well."

The cord lay against Mr. Fogg's neck now. Julian's voice lowered to an amiable whisper. "Well, Nathaniel, now you know my side." All through his recital there had been a rustling behind the chair, to which Mr. Fogg had paid no heed. Now he understood. He did not have to raise his eyes to the convex colonial mirror over the mantel to know that Julian had slipped out of his clothes, was naked behind the chair. His voice alone would have told that. A deeper timbre underscored the menace of the friendly words.

"I've always admired you, Nathaniel. Even though you never seemed to think much of me. But you did always stick up for me, and sometimes even knew what I felt. But you never *really* knew me before. Now you do, and we must become friends — for both our sakes."

The soft cord tickled the lawyer's ear. Julian's weight was pressing like a coffin lid against his back. Mr. Fogg's throat and lips were dry. The whole

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room was reflected in distorted miniature in the convex mirror.

Mr. Fogg spoke to the mirror. "Julian, make no mistake, I intend to take what I know to the police. I can do nothing else."

Julian, far off in the curved glass, sneered. "Old Martin Luther and his '*Hier stehe Ich*,' eh, Nathaniel? So be it." The cord looped about the old man's throat. Julian's voice came from the mirror and from behind the chair.

"I'm sorry, Nathaniel. I'm sorry you won't be friendly. But I suppose you have to follow the way you know. And I must follow mine. I've got to get away. I've got to escape this house, and go to New York. Perhaps that won't be any escape. Perhaps there is none — I never seem to get away with anything. But I must have my chance. They shan't put me in the electric chair. They shan't! They shan't!"

As Julian's voice rose, the cord tightened. Mr. Fogg's throat burned. He was barely able to croak, "Julian, don't be a fool. Someone else knows about that print."

Julian's voice was cunning, smug. "Of course you mean Mrs. Weymans, don't you, Nathaniel? Well, so much the worse for her. That will be attended to, all in good time."

"How do you think you will explain my death — this kind of dying?"

"Suicide, Nathaniel. You will be found hanging in the cellar. That's it! You will have hanged yourself near the foot of the stairs. There won't be any need of a note. The locket, with its pictures of Aunt Lavinia, will be standing open on the floor beside you, set up like a tiny diptych."

"You even knew about the pictures."

"I always knew. A quiet man gets to know things."

"But no one will believe it of me. I'm not the suicide kind."

"Who knows what kind of man you are, Nathaniel? Have you ever let anyone find out? Besides, they'll believe anything odd of us here in the old houses on Beacon Hill."

In his pain, Mr. Fogg knew he had lost the argument. The cord twisted slowly. Mr. Fogg's windpipe closed. His breath gathered in his lungs like a bottled storm; his chest and mouth were afire; his head pounded rhythmically with the final beats of his heart. Suddenly, Julian's cheek was against his, the soft mouth against his ear, the scent of lemon verbena bitter in his inflamed nostrils. The cord did not relax. From a great red distance came a weeping voice, its deep tone lost.

"First it was Aunt Lavinia — that was easy and needful. Now, you, Nathaniel — not easy any more. Next comes the good woman downstairs. Uncle Nathaniel, what trap am I in? I'm frightened! I'm falling down a dark place. There's no light and I daren't cry out."

Mr. Fogg could dimly understand the words through the red sheets of pain filling his world. A warm tear

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fell from above him onto his face. The round mirror and its proud eagle spun crazily, began to melt into vast blackness.

One passion flung itself like lightning through the black void. He wanted to live. Gathering up a strength he had no right to have, he flung himself backwards, upsetting the chair and knocking Julian down. The cord loosened around his thin neck; he tore it away. Julian sat on the floor, a vacant stare of slack wonder on his round face.

Sucking quick gulps of air into his burning lungs, the old man staggered across the room to the window. He took up a heavy mahogany end table and flung it through the drapes. Smashing the glass with a sound like the wrecking of the universe, it crashed to the concrete yard below. Mr. Fogg heard Mrs. Weymans cry out. He knew he was safe.

Air still felt like liquid fire as he breathed it in. And as his head cleared, the magic strength of his limbs flowed away. He sat down on the bed like a man who has been beaten for hours. On the floor, his mouth slack as a baby's, his pale eyes appallingly vacant, Julian sat sobbing like a broken-hearted child. Moving with great difficulty, Mr. Fogg covered the naked man with the jolly patchwork counterpane.

Presently, Mrs. Weymans's honest bulk was filling the door. With her was Leo, the burly houseman from the Whitmans' house next door. Hardly able to talk, Mr. Fogg asked the housekeeper to call Lieutenant Regan.

They were waiting in the front drawing room when Regan arrived. Julian, fully dressed, sat in the big red-leather chair by the fireplace. Mrs. Weymans had explained everything to the lieutenant. To some other man Regan could have given a stout grip of the arm, a touch on the shoulder. With Nathaniel Fogg a look must-do. Regan tried to make it say everything.

He had to shake his head firmly when Mr. Fogg tried to wave away the officer with the handcuffs. They clicked shut, the only sound in the handsome room. Julian looked down at them, then up at the portraits about the room, and finally at Mr. Fogg.

Julian's face seemed to clear a little.

"I'm sorry, Nathaniel, I'm awfully sorry."

Mr. Fogg moved his hand, a gentle, helpless gesture. Julian went off docilely with the detectives. His pale eyes, filled with tears, tried to focus on the clipper ship taking the fair never-never wind in its glass case. At the door, he stopped, pulling the husky detective half about.

"Nathaniel. They're going to put me in the electric chair, aren't they? I didn't get away."

The old man avoided the simple, empty face. "I don't know, Julian. I don't know. Perhaps you've got away . . ."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JOHN F. SUTER**

TITLE: ***The Thousand Mile Shot***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Walter Peterson

LOCALE: A rocket base in California

TIME: Now

COMMENTS: *Murder inside the cabin of a one-man rocket while in orbit nearly 1100 miles between Earth and outer space! A locked room baffler to end all Locked Rooms — or to begin a whole new series of them! This (science) fiction could be fact.*

WALTER PETERSON SMILED faintly into the telephone mouthpiece. "I hate to think any man is wasting his money. Don't waste any more of yours, Mr. Horton. When I retired a year ago the agency kept my name, but they didn't keep me. Call Alec Gross. He's taken over." His left hand pulled at his heavy dewlaps, and the dark thin lids closed over his tired eyes.

"I don't know Gross," the voice on the telephone said crisply. "My father always swore by you. I still remember how you found Glick for him when he tried to light out with fifty thousand of the company's money. I want you, not Gross."

Peterson sighed. "I don't have the staying power any more, Mr. Horton. You need a younger man."

The man on the telephone snorted. "Your brain's still good. Don't tell me you're through at seventy-one." He paused and swore. "I've got to get you, or somebody just as good. This murder —"

Peterson's eyes opened wide. "Murder? The police won't welcome outside help."

"Don't worry about *that*. They can't even settle whose jurisdiction the murder is in."

Peterson heaved his tremendous bulk erect in his reclining chair. "Why not?"

"The dead man is almost eleven hundred miles from here —"

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"Some other country's problem?"

"— between Earth and outer space."

Peterson looked at the telephone in distaste. "Mr. Horton, we're wasting my time and your money."

Nearly three thousand miles across the country, Horton said nervously, "Don't hang up — please. Fantastic as it sounds, it's true. More than that I can't tell you on the telephone. Will you consider flying out to California where I can tell you — and show you? All expenses paid?"

Peterson looked out at the rolling fields of his Pennsylvania farm, the black earth newly turned for Spring planting. The earthy smell was one of the few which could still stir him. He sighed.

"Mr. Horton, I'll speak plainly: I remember your father as a man who was no fool. I have never met you as a grown man. I have heard it said that you're not your father. Yet you've been successful in your own right with the money he left you. Out of curiosity — not out of good judgment — I'll come."

Less than twenty-four hours later Peterson's large body was sagging wearily in the corner of the rear seat of a black air-conditioned Cadillac. In the opposite corner, six foot six, prematurely bald, Kenneth Horton fought unsuccessfully against a devouring energy he could not control

"Mr. Peterson, you'll forgive me, I hope, for being a poor host. We're not going to a hotel. We're not even going to my home. There'll be a little ride out to the desert. I hope it won't be too much for you. But I think you'll find your facilities at the base very comfortable."

Peterson rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger. "Base, Mr. Horton?"

"Rocket base."

Peterson lowered his hand to stare at Horton. "Government project?"

Horton shook his head: "Private — until we prove out. Horton Engineering."

"And this is where the murder happened?"

Horton shook his head. "To the best of my knowledge, it happened up *there* nearly eleven hundred miles."

He gestured overhead.

A spark glowed in Peterson's eyes.

Horton went on: "Horton Engineering has been working out in the desert for five years. Very hush-hush. I don't think it's leaked. We've been trying to put the first manned rocket into space."

"Independently of the government?"

"They know what we're up to. Thing is, we've been willing to cut a few corners. They can hardly afford to. In fact, we *have* to do some cutting. Horton Engineering's not poor, but we don't have the kind of money it takes to do it on the government's scale. On the other hand, we gain by absence of red tape."

Peterson nodded. "If you're successful, you sell your model to the government?"

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"Right. And it looks as though we've been successful — almost."

"How almost?"

"We've got the rocket up there. The *Ranger I*. But it's in orbit and we can't get it down. And — somehow or other — somebody's killed the pilot."

Peterson stroked the side of his fleshy nose. "Tell me about it . . ."

Horton told him. He had been standing straddle-legged, hands deep in his pockets, his eyes flickering from the chronometers to the blank TV screens to the radar to the radio operator.

Someone in the room said, "Third revolution nearly completed. Three to go before he brings her down."

Horton snapped, "We can all count."

A metallic voice from the loudspeaker was keeping up a running comment, "In a very short time Station GWHIZ will be back on the air with your favorite TV program, that superlative serial, *Around the World in Two Hours*. The star of your show will again be that popular favorite, Smilin' Ed McElfresh. . . . How about it, am I in line of sight yet?"

The radio operator spoke into a microphone, "Screens still blank. We make it about two minutes to go."

The loudspeaker answered: "Two minutes, and we start Round Four. All over at the end of Round Six, and we land to the plaudits of the multitude."

Horton stepped to the microphone. "How about it, Ed? Is it getting too monotonous? Will six times around the earth in free fall be too much for you?"

"Too much? I'm like the kid on the Ferris wheel — scared green when I first got up to the top, but not wanting to get off afterward. I'll be back in fine shape, Mr. Horton."

Horton smiled. "We're watching for you on the screens, boy. Every time around."

"The face that sank a thousand space ships. Look for me in video tubes everywhere. I'll be seeing you."

The loudspeaker chuckled. "That reminds me —" The tone suddenly changed, the voice went up in pitch, edged with shock. "*No — no! Don't shoot!*"

The instrument room crashed and echoed. The loudspeaker shivered with a sound like a pistol shot.

The group in the instrument room looked at each other with white faces.

"*What was that?*"

The radio operator spoke urgently into the microphone: "Ed, Ed! Are you all right? What happened?"

There was no answer. The speaker remained silent.

Then the TV screens came to life as the searching eyes of the cameras that scanned every inch of the pilot's compartment in the orbiting rocket sent their pictures back to Earth.

Young Ed McElfresh, age twenty-two, was slumped in his harness 1,075 miles away. There was no visible sign of life in his body.

A gun careened aimlessly around the tiny compartment in free fall . . .

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"And there," said Horton," there he still is, Mr. Peterson, in orbit around the earth nearly eleven hundred miles up. We can't get him down. We can't look over the equipment unless we build another rocket and go up after him."

The lines of Peterson's face were arranged in incredulity. "Don't you realize you're asking the wrong man for help? I don't know anything about rockets. You must have a staff of intelligent men. Get them to work it out. I'm a businessman's detective."

Horton smacked his palm with his fist. "Just my point. I want a man who thinks your way, questions everybody's motives. This is murder, not a matter of rocket engineering."

Peterson glanced away, watching, but not seeing, the speeding sunsplashed landscape. "Several things occur to me. First, are you sure it is murder?"

Horton seemed startled. "What else could it be?"

"Suicide."

"Suicide? McElfresh? Anything but. He's definitely not the type. Completely normal. Quite extroverted. As I told you, he was joking only a moment or two before it happened."

"You're sure he was alive when he entered the rocket, that it was his living voice on the radio?"

"I saw him enter that rocket myself. As for the voice, we watched him on TV several times before this last one. It was he talking, all right."

Peterson shook his head. "How and who — we'll by-pass those for the time being. Why? Did someone hate your man?"

Horton shrugged. "Perhaps. But then whoever did it must have worked fast. The way we had it set up, we trained three pilots for the job but gave none of them the assignment. Two hours before take-off we drew a name at random. It just happened to be McElfresh's."

"Still possible, however. The other choice is an impersonal act against your pilot aimed at the *project*. Sabotage."

Horton began, "That's more —"

Peterson held up a large mottled hand. "On that I'll keep an open mind until we get there." He pushed his gray felt hat back from his forehead. "Sabotage raises several questions. For instance, why did they allow the rocket to be launched at all?"

Horton smiled humorlessly. "So that we'd have the very situation we find ourselves in. It's out of reach, where we can't get to it."

"But why not destroy it outright? Or arrange for it to crash?"

"The method of making it crash might be detected by our Chief Engineer on a check-out, but this stunt — however it was done — wasn't. A point to remember, too, Peterson: With the rocket still up there carrying a dead pilot, we don't know if it can be landed or not. That's one of the questions we can't answer for the government if we try to do business with them at this time."

Peterson lapsed into silence. After

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a time he said, "Have *you* any enemies?"

Horton smiled grimly. "Of course. Some of my competitors would cheerfully see my throat cut. But within my own organization. . . . I have some opposition, but an outright enemy — I don't know."

Peterson burrowed into his corner. "Very well. Now please be quiet — I want to think."

He closed his eyes and growled under his breath, "*No, no, don't shoot.* Hmph."

The rocket base was in the midst of a heavily fenced area of desolation. The main buildings were one-story white stucco with incredibly thick walls and slit windows to keep out the heat. In warmer weather a battery of water evaporators kept heat and humidity under control. At this time of year days were bright, but bearable. There were six main buildings: a large combined office, laboratory, and communications center; a warehouse for delicate and valuable parts; and four dormitories for personnel, all behind the office building.

A quarter of a mile away lay a group of quonsets for common storage, a large construction shed, some mobile scaffolding, a broad squat garage, and a small fire station with two trucks and an ambulance. Still farther away, perhaps half a mile, was a huge flame-splashed concrete rocket pad with a concrete control dugout nearby. Spaced at far intervals around the base were radio and TV towers.

When Horton's Cadillac arrived, there was no sign of activity anywhere except around the main buildings. A number of men in coveralls leaned against the wall of the administration center, near the door, talking and puffing nervously at cigarettes. Several others walked around from the dormitories in the rear as the car drove up. There was only one universal expression: worry.

Peterson glanced from the crowd to Horton. He took a thin gold watch from his pocket. "Getting late. I think we'd do better if I could get some sleep. I'm even willing to skip dinner." He smiled at Horton's expression. "Perhaps you're thinking of Winston Churchill and his four hours of sleep a night. I'm not Winston Churchill. Sorry."

Horton lapsed into neutrality. "Sorry. I have been inconsiderate." His face wrinkled in a smile. "Indulge me in at least one thing: Let us put you in McElfresh's room."

The folds of Peterson's face spread in an answering smile. "A fine idea. But let me tell you, Mr. Horton, I'll not look at it until morning."

"Suit yourself. I'll have the chauffeur take you to McElfresh's room and get you settled. What time do you want to be called in the morning?"

Peterson eyed the barren soil with distaste, thinking of his farm. "Don't bother. Look for me when you see me."

Peterson awoke at seven, thoroughly rested but completely ignorant of

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his whereabouts for several seconds. He sat up ponderously. Memory returned, and he looked about.

The room was dim, although the glimpse through the slit window showed a blue sunny sky. It was a very narrow room, reminiscent of a Pullman compartment. The bed was a three-quarter, with box spring and deep mattress. Peterson stood up and took three steps to the wall to press the light switch.

A soft amber light from an overhead fixture brought the room to life. Peterson walked to the four-drawer chest at the foot of the bed and removed his razor and toothbrush from the top. He inspected the three signed photographs — two blondes and a brunette, one of the blondes in an abbreviated swim suit — who had all signed Ed-all-their-love. He tilted his head to read the titles of a small stack of books on the front of the chest. Thorne Smith's *The Stray Lamb*, two of Clayton Rawson's Great Merlini mysteries, and John Dickson Carr's *The Three Coffins*. The books were well-thumbed and dog-eared.

Idly he opened the drawers of the chest, one by one. There was the usual complement of clothing and small possessions. In a top drawer he saw a box of small pellets resembling miniature tire valve caps. He eyed them in curiosity and shut the drawer.

Peterson went on to the bathroom, a tiny affair with a stall shower instead of a tub-shower combination. There was little in the medicine cabinet except shaving and toothbrushing accessories and a bottle of aspirin. He shrugged and went about his morning ritual.

When he had completed washing and shaving, Peterson padded back into the bedroom and opened the door of the small closet which shared the same end as the bathroom. An automatic switch caused a ceiling light to come on. A quick run-through showed that McElfresh's tastes ran to sports jackets and slacks, with one suit of plain medium gray. The quality of the fabrics surprised Peterson, and the cut won his instant approval. Three pairs of shoes of various styles in imported leather were racked neatly in shoetrees.

Peterson closed the door thoughtfully. He was inclined to agree with Horton: McElfresh was not the suicide type.

He had just finished dressing and was getting ready to go to breakfast when a short sharp knock sounded at the door. Expecting Horton, he swung the door wide. Instead of his client, however, he saw a small man in a white linen suit.

"Mr. Peterson?" The visitor lifted neatly trimmed, very black eyebrows. "I'm Gordon Massey. May I come in?"

"If you can find room." Peterson stepped aside to let the man enter.

There was one chair in the room, and Massey took it with an air of proprietorship. He sat there appraising Peterson. His dark hair, only

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lightly touched with gray, came to a widow's peak. His face was acidly grooved and ended in a cleft chin. Peterson guessed him to be in his early fifties.

Peterson sat on the edge of the bed, resting his weight on one arm.

Massey said, "So you're the detective he's hired. I'm Vice-President in Charge of Personnel for Horton Engineering. I'm also your prime suspect."

Peterson ignored the shock tactic. "I was about to leave for breakfast, Mr. Massey. Would you join me and tell me all about it?"

A little disconcerted, Massey said, "I'm afraid that would be too public. If you don't mind waiting, I'll make this brief."

"Then let's try to hold it to ten minutes, if we can. I'm hungry."

Massey crossed his arms on his chest. "All right. I was not being sensational. I'm sure Ken Horton believes I've sabotaged this nonsensical project of his, and has hired you to prove it."

"Why?"

"Because a number of the officers of this company are convinced that he is ruining it. For many years Horton Engineering attracted the best young men from all over the country. But recently we have not only been unable to hire the men we want, we are barely able to keep the ones we have."

Peterson listened with interest.

"You'll be wondering why this is so, especially since we have this project going. The reason is simple enough: Not every young engineer in the country is sold on space travel. We can't talk about it much in interviews; all we dare do is hint at research in rocket fuels and guided missiles. Many of the men we hired some time ago are not interested in any phase of the work, and we find it difficult to keep them happy in what they do."

"Can't they be put on something else?"

Massey uncrossed his arms. "There you have it. Horton's current passion is rockets, period. Everything else — *everything* — must be dropped. Baby must play with his toys."

"I suppose some of you have tried to reason with him?"

"That we have. We've shown him figures until we're squint-eyed. But nothing moves him — cold fact, pleading, or argument — and he has the controlling interest in the company. On top of this, I suspect he's getting information by underhand means on some of the features of the government's rockets which they're trying to keep secret. If those things should be discovered in *Ranger I*, there'd be the devil to pay. But that doesn't bother him, either."

"And you are the chief representative of the minority faction, Mr. Massey?"

"I am."

Peterson said mildly, "It would seem that Horton is right. He got his rocket up there."

Massey's black eyes snapped. "Yes, but he hasn't landed it. And we

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don't know that it *can* be landed."

Peterson glanced at his watch. "May I point out, Mr. Massey, that a visit such as this will hardly divert suspicion if you *are* guilty?"

Massey snapped, "I have a right to a hearing on my side of this affair. I didn't shoot that boy."

Peterson said imperturbably, "No one has said that you did. That wouldn't prevent your arranging for it to be done."

Massey bounced to his feet. "I'll challenge that too! Give me any test you like. Put a lie detector on me. I invite it. Ask me if I ordered that boy shot. I'm confident it will show I'm telling the truth."

Peterson glanced at his watch again. "We'll get to things like that in time, Mr. Massey. Your ten minutes are up."

He rose.

The dining hall was a long room connecting the ends of the dormitories. All personnel ate here, from officials to the lowest-paid laborer. Halfway down the hall, Horton waved as Peterson entered the doorway. Massey had left Peterson a moment before.

Horton was seated with four other men at a table for six. He nodded the detective to the vacant chair. Introductions proved the four others to be engineers of various ages.

After Peterson had ordered coffee and sweet rolls from a white-jacketed Mexican boy, Horton said, "Any ideas this early in the morning?"

"A few. Some I'd rather not discuss, some I won't mind telling. I've already met one of your executives."

Surprised Horton tapped cigarette ash into a clear glass ashtray. "Who?"

"Massey."

Horton grinned. "He tell you I'm out to hang him for this?"

"Something of the sort."

"Don't pay any attention to him. I don't. We keep him around to sort of balance things. He's a good man, but he lacks imagination. If you can't see past the end of your nose, you ought to have at least a long nose."

The coffee and rolls arrived. Sipping his black coffee, Peterson said, "Another thing. I'm fairly certain this isn't suicide."

Horton drew deeply on his cigarette. "All right. Next question: How was it done? I thought Charlie Gibson here might fill in for you." He indicated the man on his right. "Charlie's our Chief Engineer for this project."

Peterson held up a hand. "Before you begin — keep it simple, if you can."

Gibson, a burly man in his late forties, dipped his mane of brown hair and showed strong teeth below a close-cropped moustache. "I'll tell you one simple fact right now: We don't know how it was done any more than you do."

Horton cut in impatiently. "Tell him the general plan of the *Ranger I*."

"All right. The rocket. It's three-stage, with the pilot in the nose — in the final stage, obviously. The first two stages fire successively, each tak-

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ing the rocket as high as possible, then each cutting itself free of the main assembly when its fuel is exhausted. Like a bullet firing twice, leaving shells behind after each explosion. The last firing boosts the rocket up to the height of orbit before the third stage starts to 'fall,' orbit, around the earth. Up to this point everything's automatic, operated by instrument. The pilot just rides along."

Gibson paused. Peterson murmured, "I'm still with you. Go on."

"At about one thousand and seventy-five miles, which is where our rocket is now, an object in orbit circles the earth completely every two hours. When we sent McElfresh up, he was to complete six orbits. At that time he was to activate a final small-rocket charge and bring the ship down. Because the nose of the ship is dart-shaped, it comes down to earth in a long glide controlled by the pilot."

"Couldn't this entire thing have been done by remote control?"

Gibson stroked his mustache. "Possibly. But the human element will be needed sooner or later. This way we get some indication of a man's psychological reaction to space, his adaptation to free fall, where every direction is up, and so on. We're making a real beginning in training a rocket pilot. No dry run, this time."

Peterson thoughtfully put butter on a piece of sweet roll. "It is my understanding that this is a one-man rocket. Is that true?"

"Absolutely. No other human being — not even a midget — could have squeezed into that compartment."

"Then there must have been some mechanical contrivance rigged to fire that shot."

Gibson flushed from crown to collar. "I'd swear there wasn't. I inspected that cabin inch by inch myself, just before McElfresh got in, and I surely would have noticed. There's no place a gun could have been hidden."

Peterson took his spoon and tapped emphasis to his words on the coffee cup. "This is impossible, gentlemen. Impossible."

Gibson shrugged. "It happened. Don't worry, it's driving me bats, too."

"Describe this cabin in detail."

Gibson spoke carefully. "It's cylindrical in shape, like a barrel. In dead center is the pilot's seat, a sort of couch-and-harness affair made of broad webbing, designed to give maximum protection during blast-off. Blast-off's pretty wicked. Acceleration —"

"I know. I've seen pictures of tests with men who were under high strain. Go on with the cabin."

"The webbing is so arranged that the pilot can rotate freely in any direction, if he thinks it necessary. It can well be necessary, for around the cabin's circumference are rows of instruments, the air feed, the bad-air exhaust, the small food locker, the radio, and four television cameras

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trained on the pilot. Two windows, which can be blanked off with steel plates, look outside. Outside, by the way, there are a few tiny ports which can be opened to expose instruments and cameras to outside conditions for the collection of data. Above and below the pilot are two more television cameras. Below, in a separate chamber, is the rocket motor. Above, in the very tip, is shock-absorbent material and a group of long-life batteries to power the TV cameras and the other automatic instruments. As I've said, the pilot can turn freely in the cabin, in any direction, but that's about all."

Peterson was listening attentively. "Any chance that McElfresh is still alive?"

Gibson shook his head. "No. He had food, water, and air for only seventy-two hours. That time has run out. Besides, he hasn't moved a muscle since it happened."

Peterson reflected. "You gave him food, water, and air. The air was not regenerated, then?"

"No. Direct feed from oxygen tanks, continuously bled in at a controlled rate and continuously pumped out at a controlled rate."

"Food?"

"Mostly concentrates. All carefully packaged. Liquids in squeeze-bulbs. In free fall there's no gravity, and you can't pour."

"With a man vulnerable to being killed by poisoning his food or water or cutting off his air supply, why shoot him?"

Gibson nodded soberly. "One of my own questions."

Peterson clasped his wrinkled fingers around the coffee cup. "Are you still picking up the rocket on your TV?"

"Yes. It seems a waste of time, but we're watching and listening twenty-four hours a day."

Peterson pushed back his chair. "I'd like to look and listen, too."

Gibson looked at his watch. "Good idea. It won't be long before we pick up on TV again."

The communications room housed a bewildering battery of radio and television equipment in addition to a huge radar screen. It was arranged in a semi-circular layout for easy access by the operators. Three men were seated before the equipment, their attention fixed on the battery of dials and screens.

Gibson looked at a tiny blip moving on the radar screen, then consulted his watch again. He bent over to talk to one of the operators.

"Five minutes, Bernie?"

"Right. No variation yet, so far as I can see."

"Anything on the radio since it happened?"

"Nothing."

Peterson leaned closer. "About the radio —"

The operator, a lean man all horn-rimmed spectacles and long jaw, looked up. "Yes, sir?"

"I understand this was a two-way radio between the rocket and here?"

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"That's right, sir."

"Could anyone else have been talking to him from another point at the time this happened?"

The operator's eyes gleamed intelligently. "You mean, did he hear some message that made him yell not to shoot? Some threat?"

"That was my thought."

The operator, Bernie, shifted his attention back to his work as he went on talking. "No, sir, we were monitoring pretty closely here on several sets, to see if some smart characters might try to get into the act for laughs. It was strictly a cozy little chat between us."

"I take it, then, that you were on duty when this happened. Have you any ideas about it?"

"No, sir. I tried beating my brains out on it for a little while. Then the scuttle got around that you were coming, so I quit."

Peterson gazed blankly at the radar screen. "No man ought to give up thinking. Ever."

One of the other operators broke in. "Here he comes."

Peterson's glance shifted to the television screens, which had begun to flicker. In a moment seven different pictures steadied into view: the cabin of the rocket from four positions in its circumference, plus views of the cabin from above and below the pilot. The seventh picture was a breath-taking glimpse of the ball of Earth from 1,075 miles up. Peterson very nearly gave this one his full attention as he saw the vast curved rim of the globe, the gigantic cloud masses only tiny cotton puffs, the continents, the seas, the incredibly star-studded depths of space beyond.

He resisted the fascination and scanned the six other screens carefully.

McElfresh lolled in the broad webbing, exactly as described. He had evidently found conditions livable after reaching orbit, for he had removed his helmet. But he had snapped it fast to the webbing to prevent its careening in free fall. His blond head was slumped forward on his chest. His arms and legs hung slack, stirring haphazardly. His body was heavily encased in layers of protective clothing.

A pistol drifted about the cabin in a purely random path.

"Ah," said Peterson, peering at the weapon on each of the six screens in rapid succession. "Gentlemen, look at this. Do you notice anything?"

The pistol, at first glance, resembled a number of other small-bore weapons in that it was not the revolver type. However, it appeared to have two barrels, a small one superimposed on a larger one. Finer details were hard to make out because of the weapon's constant drifting.

The detective tried to absorb as many details about the cabin as he could, since he was aware that time was running out and the rocket would soon be out of sight. The cabin was exactly as Gibson, the Chief Engineer, had described.

Even as Peterson's eyes were scan-

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ning the rocket's instrument boards a second time, the screens flickered again and went blank.

Everyone sighed and straightened.

Peterson blinked slowly. "Well, gentlemen, any conclusions?"

The faces turned toward his were blank. Horton said wonderingly, "If you can see who or what fired that shot, your eyes are better than mine.

"Mine, too," Gibson said.

Peterson looked about, located a straight cane-bottom chair, and sat down. "I have a question for you. Where was he shot? Which part of his body?"

The radio operator whistled between his teeth.

Gibson rubbed his mustache.

"I'm damned," Horton said softly.

"We can't tell," Gibson murmured. "He has several layers of special clothing on, and the outer layer is self-sealing if punctured. You probably couldn't see any blood. He wasn't shot in the head, you can see that."

Peterson was about to speak, but changed his mind. He sat for a long minute, drumming his fingers against the cane bottom of the chair. "I hadn't considered that. Well. Let's leave it for the time being. Next question: What did you notice about the pistol?"

The only response to this was a general shaking of heads.

"Nothing? None of you is a shooting enthusiast, then. Very well. Between now and the next appearance of your rocket on these screens, I want you to locate someone on this project who has done some shooting, especially with small arms."

"I think I can do that," said the radio operator.

"Good." Peterson now addressed Horton directly. "I could tell you about the gun now, but I prefer an independent confirmation. And now," he said, speaking to the group, "I need to talk to Mr. Horton alone, if the rest of you will excuse us."

In a small room bare of everything except a small steel desk and some filing cabinets, Peterson and Horton faced each other across the desk.

"I'll not raise your hopes," said Peterson. "I don't have it all — yet. Here is my point: Do you realize that this could really be aimed at McElfresh, instead of at you and the project?"

Incredulous, Horton said sharply, "Even though he was picked at random to be the pilot?"

"Certainly. Because, *just before he entered the rocket, the entire thing was given a final inspection by your Chief Engineer.*"

Horton's eyes gleamed angrily. "And maybe Gibson could do whatever he did in a few seconds. Set his trap."

Peterson produced a white linen handkerchief and blew his nose. "Mr. Horton, I hope you know your men well enough to see why this might have happened."

"Gibson's daughter."

"Eh?"

"McElfresh was making a big play

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for Gibson's daughter. But the girl and her father didn't see eye-to-eye on the kid's acceptability."

Remembering the photographs in McElfresh's room, Peterson said, "I suppose he played around too much? Gibson doubted his intentions? The old-fashioned father?"

"Not quite like that. The object was matrimony, that was clear. And Gibson's broadminded enough to know that an extrovert like McElfresh takes a while to settle down to one girl. No, it's that Gibson couldn't see a long life ahead for the boy in this kind of business. He couldn't bear to think of his girl's throwing her young life away for a few brief hours of happiness."

Peterson smiled sadly. "His opposition wasn't successful, I assume? It seldom is in such cases."

"I couldn't say."

Peterson reflected. "They might even have married before he took off. That, too, would be standard procedure."

"But, if they did, would Gibson have —?"

"Not if he knew about it, Mr. Horton. But did he?"

"You intend to check on whether or not they did get married?"

Peterson sighed. "I must remind you again, Mr. Horton, that I am not a young man. Surely you have a competent secretary or someone else you can trust. I have another point I prefer to investigate myself."

"What's that?"

"I'd rather not go into it now." Peterson got stiffly to his feet. "But if you want food for thought, consider Massey's point of view. Then ask yourself whose point of view Gibson takes — yours or Massey's."

Leaving Horton, Peterson went outside into the bright sunshine. A small group of mechanics was gathered near the door to the main office, talking. As Peterson came out, the talking ceased. He was watched closely as he approached.

"I hate to intrude," he said, hooking a thumb into his belt, "but I'm looking for a man and I don't even know his name. I only know that he's the man who's responsible for the air supply system in the *Ranger I*."

A small man with birdlike features spoke. Designed or installed?"

"Installed."

"That would be Tucker."

"Where would I find him?"

The small man removed the cigarette and ground it under his heel. "I'll show you."

They walked together across the glary earth to one of the quonset huts. On the way Peterson said casually, "What's this Tucker like?"

The small man said just as casually, "Good man, they say. Don't know him real well myself."

"Single or married?"

"Single. That one would never keep money long enough to get a marriage license. Not unless they sell 'em on the installment plan."

Peterson murmured. "Perhaps an unstable personality?"

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The mechanic grinned. "We're all unstable, or we wouldn't be working here."

They passed from the dazzle of outdoors into the dim interior of the quonset. Toward the rear, in a jumble of torpedo-shaped cylinders and metal tubing, two men were arguing in slightly raised tones.

"— can't help what your inventory says."

"And you don't realize, Tucker, that we can't afford to make a mistake on even a nickel item on this project. We checked in fifty nitrogen cylinders, and there's only forty-eight."

"You were short-changed, and Receiving was off-feed that day and must have believed the bill of lading instead of counting. Listen, Hern, I know where every cylinder of every gas is that's come in, full or empty." Tucker, an almost painfully neat man pushing thirty, ran a thin hand over crew-cut pale hair.

The mechanic spoke to Peterson in a low voice, "The big one's Hern, in charge of stock. He has apoplexy if you misplace a lock washer."

Hern slapped a big palm against a paper he was carrying. "I know why you're cocky and uncooperative. You think I haven't heard about that transfer you have lined up? You think Management couldn't queer the whole thing at this late date if you don't do the job right? Me, I believe in giving the company full value, right up to the last minute." He stared at Tucker, snorted, and turned his broad back. His bulk towered over Peterson and the mechanic as he walked past, ignoring them.

"Something I can do for you?" asked Tucker, starting forward.

Peterson's foot kicked the mechanic's heel. "Why, no. Later, perhaps." On the way back across the yard he said to the mechanic, "I've wasted your time. Sorry. But I don't think this is the proper time to talk to Tucker."

The mechanic glanced at him from the corner of his eye: "You think that go-round with Hern would bother Tucker? That was nothing."

A shout stopped Peterson's reply.

"Peterson! Glad I found you." It was Horton calling. "We've located your gun enthusiast. And it's soon time for the next look at *Ranger I*."

When Peterson reached the cool shade of the main building, he saw a squat man with thick forearms standing beside Horton.

"Mr. Peterson, Ralph Sill. Ralph knows all there is to know about guns, they tell me."

The folds of Peterson's face lifted in a smile as he shook Sill's rocklike hand. "Indeed?"

He slipped a small notebook and pencil from his pocket, wrote on a page, tore it out, folded it, and gave the paper to Sill.

"Mr. Sill," he said as he held out the paper, "we're going to look at a gun on TV in a few minutes. After you've seen it, don't say anything. Look at this and see if you agree. Then tell me yes or no."

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Peterson watched Sill's face as he read the paper. Sill looked up.

"Yes."

"Any ideas whose it was?"

Sill took out a pencil and wrote on the paper. He handed it to Peterson, who read it with a sardonic smile. "I thought so."

Horton drew Peterson aside. "You getting anywhere?"

Peterson cleared his throat. "Perhaps. When I have heard from your secretary about McElfresh's possible marriage, I'll know better where I stand. And not long after that I think we had better call the State Police." His face looked strained and old. "I'm very tired, and I think I'll rest for the remainder of the day. We need shortcuts. One of them is a lie detector. I'll ask the police to bring one along."

Hours melted away in sunshine, night, then more sunshine. Finally, there was a woman's voice on the telephone. "Mr. Peterson? Mr. Horton's secretary, Mrs. Pierce, calling. You were interested in Barbara Gibson. I've talked to her myself — a long talk. She tells me they got married a week before it happened. I checked the records. It's true."

"Thank you," said Peterson thoughtfully.

It was now evening of Peterson's second full day at the rocket base. In the communications room were gathered Horton, Massey, Gibson, Bernie the radio operator, Tucker, a State Police lieutenant and sergeant, a police stenographer, and Peterson. In addition to the array of communications equipment, a table had been set up with chairs around it. On the table top the apparatus of a lie detector had been set up.

With the exception of Peterson and the State Police officers, all were seated and facing the battery of electronic equipment. Peterson stood to the right, the police to the left, facing the others.

Peterson cleared his throat. "Gentlemen, I begin by assuming that all of you know why I was called here. I have already explained this to Lieutenant Garber and Sergeant Perkins. Since this crime was committed over California, it is tentatively assumed that the State Police have jurisdiction; this is because it is assumed legally that a given territory extends upward at least to the boundary of the earth's gravitational field." He did not add that he had warned the police that the exact region where the murder had occurred was not yet defined. "Before we get too involved in explanations, we should brief these gentlemen on exactly what McElfresh was saying at the time of his death."

He nodded and the radio operator leaned over a tape recorder and switched it on. The conversation held the audience's attention, although most of them by now could have repeated it by heart.

The speaker yelled loudly again, "*No — no! Don't shoot!*" The sound

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of the shot crashed out once more.

Sergeant Perkins snorted. "I don't believe it! Next thing you'll be telling us he saw little green men climbing through the window!"

Peterson smiled faintly. "That's one solution we haven't considered. However, we needn't examine that solution now. There's a better one."

Horton started from his chair.

Peterson looked at him impersonally. "Sit down, Mr. Horton. This will take time." He looked at his pocket watch.

"As I told Mr. Horton when I took this job, my engineering knowledge is very skimpy. All I could possibly go on was my understanding of people. I have since found it useful to fill in with a little technical information. I have also made use of my fondness for detective fiction, which I read for relaxation.

"If we ignore the fantastic locale of this crime and its bizarre aspects," the detective went on, "we come down to the question: Why was McElfresh murdered?

"In the beginning it looked as though this were an impersonal thing, because of the random way in which McElfresh was chosen to pilot the *Ranger I*. This reduces the matter to an attempt to sabotage the project. In that case, the answer could be foreign agents. That might still be true, but I intend to leave such an investigation to the proper authorities. I doubt it, personally. Or it could be a cleverly disguised scheme of Mr. Horton's."

Horton jumped up again. "What scheme? Why would I scuttle my own work?"

"Suppose, Mr. Horton, you had learned that government information on rocketry had leaked to your engineers. And suppose some of the government's exact ideas were incorporated in your rocket. Suppose you found this out too late to remedy it. And you knew that inspection of your rocket by government experts would inevitably reveal the theft of the government's ideas. It could be more costly in many ways than the thing that's happened."

Massey yelped, "This is something I've been suspecting. Horton, if you don't throw in the towel after this, I'll see that they break you—"

Horton stormed, "And I'm asked to pay good money for such lies! I refuse to honor our agreement."

Peterson said mildly, "I haven't finished."

Horton glowered and sat down. The old detective shifted his attention to the Vice-President in Charge of Personnel.

"Again on the impersonal basis, Mr. Massey could be responsible for what happened. He himself has told me why. He is thoroughly convinced that Mr. Horton is ruining the business. The question is, would Massey condone murder?"

It was Massey's turn to glare. "I'll make the same offer I made before. Give me a lie detector test. I'll show you that I didn't contrive that shot, or even order it contrived!"

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Peterson gave him a long look. "Your choice of words is very interesting, Mr. Massey. 'Order it contrived.' You think of everything."

Massey said coldly, "I try to anticipate the thoughts of fools."

"Do you, indeed? Well. Let us leave you, for the moment. We must now consider the personal element rather than the impersonal. Mr. Gibson, I understand you had a certain animosity toward McElfresh."

Gibson's mustache bristled. "That's none of your affair. It hasn't any bearing on this."

"Intolerant fathers have been known to commit murder, Mr. Gibson."

"What's true of one man isn't necessarily true of another!"

Peterson nodded solemnly. "Quite right, Mr. Gibson. If your daughter and McElfresh had not been married just before *Ranger I* blasted off, I might suppose you guilty. However, if I judge you correctly, you are the type who would make the best of a *fait accompli* for the sake of your daughter's happiness. Your interest would be to bring that boy back — alive."

Gibson growled, "Thanks."

Peterson went on, "Your daughter had already married McElfresh and you knew it. I was given that information this afternoon. I think we can eliminate you — *although you're capable of having caused McElfresh's death.*"

Gibson's truculence changed to wariness. "How?"

"If Mr. Tucker will answer some questions, I'll tell you how."

Tucker shrugged. "All right. Ask."

Peterson shook his head. "Only if you will permit Sergeant Perkins to give you a lie detector test."

Tucker ran a thin hand over his pale crew-cut. "Why should I?"

Peterson said, "Why shouldn't you? I intend to go on talking if you don't."

Tucker's eyes were ice-blue, absent of expression. "All right." He got up, walked to the table, and sat down. Sergeant Perkins quickly adjusted the instruments on his bare arm and around his chest to record heartbeat and breathing. When he had finished Perkins glanced at Peterson who walked over and took a chair facing Tucker.

"Your full name, Mr. Tucker?"

"James McClellan Tucker."

"Born where?"

"Indianapolis."

"Age?"

"Twenty-nine. Almost thirty."

"What's your job here, Mr. Tucker?"

"I designed and installed the air supply and exhaust system on *Ranger I*."

"You did a good job?"

"I think so. Mr. Gibson and Mr. Horton were both pleased with my work — at least, they said they were."

"In simple terms, how was McElfresh to be supplied with fresh air?"

"Oxygen cylinders in series. When one cylinder was exhausted, the next one would cut in."

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Peterson looked at the audience. Interest was at a high pitch.

"I hear that you are about to leave Horton Engineering for another job."

Tucker hesitated.

"Mr. Tucker?"

"Yes. But I hadn't announced it yet."

"Do you have a recommendation, Mr. Tucker? To your next employer, that is?"

Tucker's forehead began to glisten. "I hope to get one."

Sergeant Jenkins murmured. "Uh-oh."

Tucker said quickly. "I'll change that. Yes, I have a recommendation."

Peterson turned to the others. "Either Mr. Horton, Mr. Massey, or Gibson would give that endorsement." He turned back to Tucker. "Am I correct?"

Tucker's voice was low. "Yes."

Peterson said, "If an oxygen cylinder and a nitrogen cylinder were standing side by side in this room, could I tell them apart?"

Tucker's voice strengthened. "Of course."

"How?"

"They're stencilled with the name. And the color is different."

"But a fresh coat of paint and a new stencil could change that?"

Tucker was silent. Finally he said, "Yes."

Peterson turned away from Tucker. "I'd like to take a moment to observe that, had I wished to murder McElfresh at a distance, my preference would be for poison in the food, water, or air. Since all of the readily available internal poisons produce some evidence of contortions on the face of the victim, I consider poison in the food or water unlikely. If you will look at McElfresh's face the next time around — very shortly — I think you'll agree it wasn't poison."

"He was shot, anyway," said several voices at once.

Peterson ignored this. "Asphyxiation of most types would also show some concrete evidence. But tell me this, Mr. Tucker, have you ever read any books on aqualung diving?"

"Some."

"Are you familiar with the effect that nitrogen produces on the brain?"

Tucker licked his lips. "The guy gets kind of silly, doesn't he?"

"He's on top of the world. Everything's a huge joke. He's even willing to throw away his air. Isn't that so?"

"I — I guess so."

"But nitrogen is poisonous, in that it doesn't support animal life. Am I right?"

No answer.

"Am I right, Mr. Tucker?"

The response was almost inaudible. "Yes."

"So that, if McElfresh were breathing air that was almost all nitrogen, he might not realize it? Its exhilarating effect might prevent his noticing anything — since it is odorless, anyway?"

"Yes."

Lieutenant Garber, watching Peterson with respect, said, "But the gun?"

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Peterson smiled grimly, "The pistol. Yes. That infernal pistol. Look at these."

He pulled out the small pellets he had found in McElfresh's drawer. Garber's eyes gleamed when he saw them.

"Those are —"

"One moment. Look at the TV screen."

The screens were beginning to register pictures again.

Peterson got up and began to point. "Look here. You'll see no wound on McElfresh. There has been an explanation for that offered to me, and I'll accept it. It is also unnecessary. Look at the gun."

Lieutenant Garber said in puzzlement. "An air pistol."

Peterson clapped his palms together. "Right! I recognized it at once. So did a Mr. Sill who is employed here. So did you."

"Why an air pistol?"

Peterson held out the pellets again. "These go with the pistol. I found them in McElfresh's drawer. They were his, to be used in that pistol."

"Then the pistol is his."

"Right. Mr. Sill has also verified that for me."

Both policemen were frowning.

Gibson spoke up. "How come?"

"It had to be his. *McElfresh fired the shot.*"

Horton cut in. "You told me it *wasn't* suicide."

"It wasn't. But why an air pistol? Because it would fire a blank shot without fouling the air."

Garber said, "I still don't get his reason."

Peterson sat down again. "There is none, if you try to equate his death with the shot. But if you consider his character, you'll see it.

"McElfresh was an extrovert. Everyone agrees on that. The transcript of the radio conversation shows it. The books he read show it — mysteries and Thorne Smith. And one of his books is John Dickson Carr's *The Three Coffins*, which contains the most complete discussion of locked room puzzles ever written. And what do we have here? A locked room, if ever there was one!

"McElfresh must have considered how boring it might become up there after the first few hours, and it must have crossed his mind to play an elaborate practical joke on those on the ground. He would construct a locked room puzzle which would plague the minds of his associates for a few hours. How could a man be shot from a distance of a thousand miles or more away? So he smuggled the pistol — unloaded — with him. At the right moment, *when he couldn't be seen*, he shouted and fired the gun. Then he slumped over in pretended death.

"What he didn't know was that he was breathing nitrogen just then. While he was holding his 'dead' position, he actually did die."

Peterson paused and turned to Tucker. "Am I right, Tucker?"

Tucker was chalk-white. He swallowed, trying to speak.

Peterson turned away. "I am re-

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minded of Mr. Massey's earlier remark — *order it contrived.* You offered to take a lie detector test about the shot, Massey. But how about one on nitrogen asphyxiation? How much did you pay Tucker to install two cylinders of nitrogen — the two missing cylinders — in *Ranger I?* And there's a man named Hern on this base who knows the nitrogen is missing, by the way."

Massey jumped to his feet. "I'll take no test. I'll get a lawyer and make you eat those words, Peterson. They'll take your license —"

"Which I don't own any more."

Tucker said hoarsely, "Go ahead, Massey. Get a lawyer. Be sure it's a good one, because I'm not standing for this alone."

Massey winced and grasped the top of his chair. In the next instant he flung the chair at the legs of Lieutenant Garber, who was advancing toward him, and raced for the door.

There was a sharp crack and Massey fell to the floor, his leg streaming blood. He whimpered with pain.

"Shorter range than that other shot," said Sergeant Jenkins, putting his revolver back into its holster.

In the dark, Peterson and Horton walked across the rapidly cooling sands of the rocket base. The stars glittered in the clear air. Something like a meteor flashed across the heavens.

Looking up Peterson, said, "He has a magnificent tomb. He'd have liked that. Will you try to get him down?"

Horton stopped and looked up, too. No moving object was now visible in the sky.

"I can't. I have to be honest: We've passed the point where we can afford to send up another ship. We're not broke. We can turn to other projects — perhaps along the more conventional lines Massey would have preferred." Peterson could dimly see a tired smile on Horton's face. "Anyway, we've given 'em something to shoot at."

NEXT MONTH . . .

Hercule Poirot and the "eternal triangle" —

AGATHA CHRISTIE's *Before It Is Too Late*

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JOHN DICKSON CARR**

TITLE: ***The Incautious Burglar***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Dr. Gideon Fell

LOCALE: Kent, England

COMMENTS: *One of Dr. Fell's most brilliant efforts — "a case so crazy that nobody but Dr. Fell could solve it" — with more twists and turns, more unexpected developments, than are found in many a full-length novel . . .*

TWO GUESTS, WHO WERE NOT STAYing the night at Cranleigh Court, left at shortly past 11 o'clock. Marcus Hunt saw them to the front door. Then he returned to the dining-room, where the poker chips were now stacked into neat piles of white, red, and blue.

"Another game?" suggested Rolfe.

"No good," said Derek Henderson. His tone, as usual, was weary. "Not with just the three of us."

Their host stood by the sideboard and watched them. The long, low house, overlooking the Weald of Kent, was so quiet that their voices rose with startling loudness. The dining-room, large and paneled, was softly lighted by electric wall-candles which brought out the somber colors of the paintings. It is not often that anybody sees, in one room of an otherwise commonplace country house, two Rembrandts and a Van Dyck. There was a kind of defiance about those paintings.

To Arthur Rolfe — the art dealer — they represented enough money to make him shiver. To Derek Henderson — the art critic — they represented a problem. What they represented to Marcus Hunt was not apparent.

Hunt stood by the sideboard, his fists on his hips, smiling. He was a middle-sized, stocky man, with a full face and a high complexion. Equip him with a tuft of chin-whisker and he would have looked like a Dutch burgher for a Dutch brush. His shirt-

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front bulged out untidily. He watched with ironical amusement while Henderson picked up a pack of cards in long fingers, cut them into two piles, and shuffled with a sharp flick of each thumb which made the cards melt together like a conjuring trick.

Henderson yawned.

"My boy," said Hunt, "you surprise me."

"That's what I try to do," answered Henderson, still wearily. He looked up. "But why do you say so, particularly?"

Henderson was young, he was long, he was lean, he was immaculate; and he wore a beard. It was a reddish beard, which moved some people to hilarity. But he wore it with an air of complete naturalness.

"I'm surprised," said Hunt, "that you enjoy anything so bourgeois — so plebeian — as poker."

"I enjoy reading people's characters," said Henderson. "Poker's the best way to do it, you know."

Hunt's eyes narrowed. "Oh? Can you read my character, for instance?"

"With pleasure," said Henderson. Absently he dealt himself a poker hand, face up. It contained a pair of fives, and the last card was the ace of spades. Henderson remained staring at it for a few seconds.

"And I can tell you," he went on, "that *you* surprise *me*. Do you mind if I'm frank? I had always thought of you as the Colossus of Business; the smasher; the plunger; the fellow who took the long chances. Now, you're not like that at all."

Marcus Hunt laughed. But Henderson was undisturbed.

"You're tricky, but you're cautious. I doubt if you ever took a long chance in your life. Another surprise" — he dealt himself a new hand — "is Mr. Rolfe here. He's the man who, given the proper circumstances, would take the long chance."

Arthur Rolfe considered this. He looked startled, but rather flattered. Though in height and build not unlike Hunt, there was nothing untidy about him. He had a square, dark face, with thin shells of eyeglasses, and a worried forehead.

"I doubt that," he declared, very serious about this. Then he smiled. "A person who took long chances in my business would find himself in the soup." He glanced round the room. "Anyhow, I'd be too cautious to have three pictures, with an aggregate value of more than fifty thousand pounds, hanging in an unprotected downstairs room with French windows giving on a terrace." An almost frenzied note came into his voice. "Great Scot! Suppose a burglar —"

"Damn!" said Henderson unexpectedly.

Even Hunt jumped.

Ever since the poker party an uneasy atmosphere had been growing. Hunt had picked up an apple from a silver fruit bowl on the sideboard. He was beginning to pare it with a fruit knife, a sharp wafer-thin blade which glittered in the light of the wall-lamps.

"You nearly made me slice my

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thumb off," he said, putting down the knife. "What's the matter with you?"

"It's the ace of spades," said Henderson, still languidly. "That's the second time it's turned up in five minutes."

Arthur Rolfe chose to be dense. "Well? What about it?"

"I think our young friend is being psychic," said Hunt, good-humored again. "Are you reading characters, or only telling fortunes?"

Henderson hesitated. His eyes moved to Hunt, and then to the wall over the sideboard where Rembrandt's *Old Woman with Cap* stared back with the immobility and skin coloring of a red Indian. Then Henderson looked towards the French windows opening on the terrace.

"None of my affair," shrugged Henderson. "It's your house and your collection and your responsibility. But this fellow Cutler: what do you know about him?"

Marcus Hunt looked amused.

"Cutler? He's a friend of my niece's. Harriet picked him up in London, and asked me to invite him down here. Nonsense! Cutler's all right. What are you thinking, exactly?"

"Listen!" said Rolfe, holding up his hand.

The noise they heard, from the direction of the terrace, was not repeated. It was not repeated because the person who made it, a bewildered and uneasy young lady, had run swiftly to the far end, where she leaned against the balustrade.

Lew Cutler hesitated before going after her. The moonlight was so clear that one could see the mortar between the tiles which paved the terrace, and trace the design of the stone urns along the balustrade. Harriet Davis wore a white gown with long, filmy skirts, which lifted clear of the ground as she ran.

Then she beckoned to him.

She was half sitting, half leaning against the rail. Her white arms were spread out, fingers gripping the stone. Dark hair and dark eyes became even more vivid by moonlight. He could see the rapid rise and fall of her breast; he could even trace the shadow of her eyelashes.

"That was a lie, anyhow," she said.

"What was?"

"What my Uncle Marcus said. You heard him." Harriet Davis's fingers tightened still more on the balustrade. But she nodded her head vehemently, with fierce accusation. "About my knowing you. And inviting you here. I never saw you before this weekend. Either Uncle Marcus is going out of his mind or . . . will you answer me just one question?"

"If I can."

"Very well. Are you by any chance a crook?"

She spoke with as much simplicity and directness as though she had asked him whether he might be a doctor or a lawyer. Lew Cutler was not unwise enough to laugh. She was in that mood where, to any woman, laughter is salt to a raw wound; she would probably have slapped his face.

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"To be quite frank about it," he said, "I'm not. Will you tell me why you asked?"

"This house," said Harriet, looking at the moon, "used to be guarded with burglar alarms. If you as much as touched a window, the whole place started clanging like a fire station. He had all the burglar alarms removed last week. Last week." She took her hands off the balustrade, and pressed them together hard. "The pictures used to be upstairs, in a locked room next to his bedroom. He had them moved downstairs — last week. It's almost as though my uncle *wanted* the house to be burgled."

Cutler knew that he must exercise great care.

"Perhaps he does." (Here she looked at Cutler quickly, but did not comment.) "For instance," he went on idly, "suppose one of his famous Rembrandts turned out to be a fake? It might be a relief not to have to show it to his expert friends."

The girl shook her head.

"No," she said. "They're all genuine. You see, I thought of that too."

Now was the time to hit, and hit hard. To Lew Cutler, in his innocence, there seemed to be no particular problem. He took out his cigarette case, and turned it over.

"Look here, Miss Davis, you're not going to like this. But I can tell you of cases in which people were rather anxious to have their property 'stolen.' If a picture is insured for more than its value, and then is mysteriously 'stolen' one night —?"

"That might be all very well too," answered Harriet, still calmly. "Except that not one of those pictures has been insured."

The cigarette case, which was of polished metal, slipped through Cutler's fingers and fell with a clatter on the tiles. It spilled cigarettes, just as it spilled and confused his theories. As he bent over to pick it up, he could hear a church clock across the Weald strike the half hour after 11.

"You're sure of that?"

"I'm perfectly sure. He hasn't insured any of his pictures for as much as a penny. He says it's a waste of money."

"But —"

"Oh, I know! And I don't know why I'm talking to you like this. You're a stranger, aren't you?" She folded her arms, drawing her shoulders up as though she were cold. Uncertainty, fear, and plain nerves flicked at her eyelids. "But then Uncle Marcus is a stranger too. Do you know what I think? *I* think he's going mad."

"Hardly as bad as that, is it?"

"Yes, go on," the girl suddenly stormed at him. "*Say* it: go on and say it. That's easy enough. But you don't see him when his eyes seem to get smaller, and all that genial country-squire look goes out of his face. He's not a fake; he *hates* fakes, and goes out of his way to expose them. But, if he hasn't gone clear out of his mind, what can he be up to?"

In something over three hours, they found out.

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The burglar did not attack until half-past 2 in the morning. First, he smoked several cigarettes in the shrubbery below the rear terrace. When he heard the church clock strike, he waited a few minutes more, and then slipped up the steps to the French windows of the dining-room.

A chilly wind stirred at the turn of the night, in the hour of suicides and bad dreams. It smoothed grass and trees with a faint rustling. When the man glanced over his shoulder, the last of the moonlight distorted his face: it showed less a face than the blob of black-cloth mask, under a greasy cap pulled down over his ears.

He went to work on the middle window, with the contents of a folding tool-kit not so large as a motorist's. He fastened two short strips of adhesive tape to the glass just beside the catch. Then his glass-cutter sliced out a small semicircle inside the tape.

It was done not without noise: it crunched like a dentist's drill in a tooth, and the man stopped to listen.

There was no answering noise. No dog barked.

With the adhesive tape holding the glass so that it did not fall and smash, he slid his gloved hand through the opening and twisted the catch. The weight of his body deadened the creaking of the window when he pushed inside.

He knew exactly what he wanted. He put the tool-kit into his pocket, and drew out an electric torch. Its beam moved across to the sideboard; it touched gleaming silver, a bowl of fruit, and a wicked little knife thrust into an apple as though into someone's body; finally, it moved up the hag-face of the *Old Woman with Cap*.

This was not a large picture, and the burglar lifted it down easily. He pried out glass and frame. Though he tried to roll up the canvas with great care, the brittle paint cracked in small stars which wounded the hag's face. The burglar was so intent on this that he never noticed the presence of another person in the room.

He was an incautious burglar: he had no sixth sense which smelled murder.

Up on the second floor of the house, Lew Cutler was awakened by a muffled crash like that of metal objects falling.

He had not fallen into more than a half doze all night. He knew with certainty what must be happening, though he had no idea of why, or how, or to whom.

Cutler was out of bed and into his slippers as soon as he heard the first faint clatter from downstairs. His dressing gown would, as usual, twist itself up like a rolled umbrella and defy all attempts to find the armholes whenever he wanted to hurry. But the little flashlight was ready in the pocket.

That noise seemed to have roused nobody else. With certain possibilities in his mind, he had never in his life moved so fast once he managed to get out of his bedroom. Not using his light, he went down two flights of

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deep-carpeted stairs without noise. In the lower hall he could feel a draught, which meant that a window or door had been opened somewhere. He made straight for the dining-room.

But he was too late.

Once the pencil-beam of Cutler's flashlight had swept round, he switched on a whole blaze of lights. The burglar was still here, right enough. But the burglar was lying very still in front of the sideboard; and, to judge by the amount of blood on his sweater and trousers, he would never move again.

"That's done it," Cutler said aloud.

A silver service, including a tea urn, had been toppled off the sideboard. Where the fruit bowl had fallen, the dead man lay on his back among a litter of oranges, apples, and a squashed bunch of grapes. The mask still covered the burglar's face; his greasy cap was flattened still further on his ears; his gloved hands were thrown wide.

Fragments of smashed picture-glass lay round him, together with the empty frame, and the *Old Woman with Cap* had been half crumped up under his body. From the position of the most conspicuous bloodstains, Cutler judged that the intruder had been stabbed through the chest with the stained fruit knife beside him.

"What is it?" said a voice almost at Cutler's ear.

He could not have been more startled if the fruit knife had pricked his ribs. He had seen nobody turning on lights in the hall, nor had he heard Harriet Davis approach. She was standing just behind him, wrapped in a Japanese kimono, with her dark hair round her shoulders. But, when he explained what had happened, she would not look into the dining-room; she backed away, shaking her head violently, like an urchin ready for flight.

"You had better wake up your uncle," Cutler said briskly, with a confidence he did not feel. "And the servants. I must use your telephone." Then he looked her in the eyes. "Yes, you're quite right. I think you've guessed it already. I'm a police officer."

She nodded.

"Yes. I guessed. Who are you? And is your name really Cutler?"

"I'm a sergeant of the Criminal Investigation Department. And my name really is Cutler. Your uncle brought me here."

"Why?"

"I don't know. He hasn't got round to telling me."

This girl's intelligence, even when overshadowed by fear, was direct and disconcerting. "But if he wouldn't say why he wanted a police officer, how did they come to send you? He'd have to tell them, wouldn't he?"

Cutler ignored it. "I must see your uncle. Will you go upstairs and wake him, please?"

"I can't," said Harriet. "Uncle Marcus isn't in his room."

"Isn't —?"

"No. I knocked at the door on my way down. He's gone."

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Cutler took the stairs two treads at a time. Harriet had turned on all the lights on her way down, but nothing stirred in the bleak, over-decorated passages.

Marcus Hunt's bedroom was empty. His dinner jacket had been hung up neatly on the back of a chair, his shirt laid across the seat with collar and tie on top of it. Hunt's watch ticked loudly on the dressing table. His money and keys were there too. But he had not gone to bed, for the bedspread was undisturbed.

The suspicion which came to Lew Cutler, listening to the thin insistent ticking of that watch in the drugged hour before dawn, was so fantastic that he could not credit it.

He started downstairs again, and on the way he met Arthur Rolfe blundering out of another bedroom down the hall. The art dealer's stocky body was wrapped in a flannel dressing gown. He was not wearing his eyeglasses, which gave his face a bleary and rather caved-in expression. He planted himself in front of Cutler, and refused to budge.

"Yes," said Cutler. "You don't have to ask. It's a burglar."

"I knew it," said Rolfe calmly. "Did he get anything?"

"No. He was murdered."

For a moment Rolfe said nothing, but his hand crept into the breast of his dressing gown as though he felt pain there.

"Murdered? You don't mean the *burglar* was murdered?"

"Yes."

"But why? By an accomplice, you mean? Who is the burglar?"

"That," said Lew Cutler, "is what I intend to find out."

In the lower hall he found Harriet Davis, who was now standing in the doorway of the dining-room and looking steadily at the body by the sideboard. Though her face hardly moved a muscle, her eyes brimmed over.

"You're going to take off the mask, aren't you?" she asked, without turning round.

Stepping with care to avoid squashed fruit and broken glass, Cutler leaned over the dead man. He pushed back the peak of the greasy cap; he lifted the black-cloth mask, which was clumsily held by an elastic band; and he found what he expected to find.

The burglar was Marcus Hunt — stabbed through the heart while attempting to rob his own house.

"You see, sir," Cutler explained to Dr. Gideon Fell on the following afternoon, "that's the trouble. However you look at it, the case makes no sense."

Again he went over the facts.

"Why should the man burgle his own house and steal his own property? Every one of those paintings is valuable, and not a single one is insured! Consequently, why? Was the man a simple lunatic? What did he think he was doing?"

The village of Sutton Valence, straggling like a gray-white Italian town along the very peak of the

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Weald, was full of hot sunshine. In the apple orchard behind the white inn of the *Tabard*, Dr. Gideon Fell sat at a garden table among wasps, with a pint tankard at his elbow. Dr. Fell's vast bulk was clad in a white linen suit. His pink face smoked in the heat, and his wary lookout for wasps gave him a regrettably wall-eyed appearance as he pondered.

He said: "Superintendent Hadley suggested that I might — harrumph — look in here. The local police are in charge, aren't they?"

"Yes. I'm merely standing by."

"Hadley's exact words to me were, 'It's so crazy that nobody but you could solve it.' The man's flattery becomes more nauseating every day." Dr. Fell scowled. "I say, does anything else strike you as queer about this business?"

"Well, why should a man burgle his own house?"

"No, no, no!" growled Dr. Fell. "Don't be obsessed with that point. Don't become hypnotized by it. For instance" — a wasp hovered near his tankard, and he distended his cheeks and blew it away with one vast puff like Father Neptune — "for instance, the young lady seems to have raised an interesting question. If Marcus Hunt wouldn't say why he wanted a detective in the house, why did the C.I.D. consent to send you?"

Cutler shrugged his shoulders.

"Because," he said, "Chief Inspector Ames thought Hunt was up to funny business, and meant to stop it."

"What sort of funny business?"

"A faked burglary to steal his own pictures for the insurance. It looked like the old, old game of appealing to police to divert suspicion. In other words, sir, exactly what this appeared to be: until I learned, and today proved, that not one of those damned pictures has ever been insured for a penny."

Cutler hesitated.

"It can't have been a practical joke," he went on. "Look at the elaborateness of it! Hunt put on old clothes from which all tailors' tabs and laundry marks were removed. He put on gloves and a mask. He got hold of a torch and an up-to-date kit of burglar's tools. He went out of the house by the back door — we found it open later. He smoked a few cigarettes in the shrubbery below the terrace — we found his footprints in the soft earth. He cut a pane of glass . . . but I've told you all that."

"And then," mused Dr. Fell, "somebody killed him."

"Yes. The last and worst 'why.' Why should anybody have killed him?"

"H'm. Clues?"

"Negative." Cutler took out his notebook. "According to the police surgeon, he died of a direct heart-wound from a blade — presumably that fruit knife — so thin that the wound was difficult to find. There were a number of his fingerprints, but nobody else's. We did find one odd thing, though. A number of pieces in the silver service off the sideboard were scratched in a queer way. It looked

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almost as though, instead of being swept off the sideboard in a struggle, they had been piled up on top of each other like a tower; and then pushed —"

Cutler paused, for Dr. Fell was shaking his big head back and forth with an expression of Gargantuan distress.

"Well, well, well," he was saying. "Well, well, well. And you call that negative evidence?"

"Isn't it? It doesn't explain why a man burgles his own house."

"Look here," said the doctor mildly. "I should like to ask you just one question. What is the most important point in this affair? One moment! I did not say the most interesting — I said the most important. Surely it is the fact that a man has been murdered?"

"Yes, sir. Naturally."

"I mention the fact" — the doctor was apologetic — "because it seems in danger of being overlooked. It hardly interests you. You are concerned only with Hunt's senseless masquerade. You don't mind a throat being cut, but you can't stand a leg being pulled. Why not try working at it from the other side, and asking who killed Hunt?"

Cutler was silent for a long time.

"The servants are out of it," he said at length. "They sleep in another wing on the top floor; and for some reason," he hesitated, "somebody locked them in last night." His doubts, even his dreads, were beginning to take form. "There was a fine blow-up over that when the house was roused. Of course, the murderer could have been an outsider."

"You know it wasn't," said Dr. Fell. "Would you mind taking me to Cranleigh Court?"

They came out on the terrace in the hottest part of the afternoon.

Dr. Fell sat down on a wicker settee, with a dispirited Harriet beside him. Derek Henderson, in flannels, perched his long figure on the balustrade. Arthur Rolfe alone wore a dark suit and seemed out of place. For the pale green and brown of the Kentish lands, which rarely acquired harsh color, now blazed. No air stirred, no leaf moved in that brilliant thickness of heat; and down in the garden, towards their left, the water of the swimming pool sparkled with hot, hard light. Cutler felt it like a weight on his eyelids.

Derek Henderson's beard was at once languid and yet aggressive.

"It's no good," he said. "Don't keep on asking me why Hunt should have burgled his own house. But I'll give you a tip."

"Which is?" inquired Dr. Fell.

"Whatever the reason was," returned Henderson, "it was a good reason. Hunt was much too canny and cautious ever to do anything without a good reason. I told him so last night."

Dr. Fell spoke sharply. "Cautious? Why do you say that?"

"Well, for instance. I take three cards on the draw. Hunt takes one. I

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bet; he sees me and raises. I cover that, and raise again. Hunt drops out. In other words, it's fairly certain he's filled his hand, but not so certain I'm holding much more than a pair. Yet Hunt drops out. So with my three sevens I bluff him out of his straight. He played a dozen hands last night just like that."

Henderson began to chuckle. Seeing the expression on Harriet's face, he checked himself and became solemn.

"But then, of course," Henderson added, "he had a lot on his mind last night."

Nobody could fail to notice the change of tone.

"So? And what did he have on his mind?"

"Exposing somebody he had always trusted," replied Henderson coolly. "That's why I didn't like it when the ace of spades turned up so often."

"You'd better explain that," said Harriet, after a pause. "I don't know what you're hinting at, but you'd better explain that. He told you he intended to expose somebody he had always trusted?"

"No. Like myself, he only hinted at it."

It was the stolid Rolfe who stormed into the conversation then. Rolfe had the air of a man determined to hold hard to reason, but finding it difficult.

"Listen to me," snapped Rolfe. "I heard a great deal, at one time or another, about Mr. Hunt's liking to expose people. Very well!" He slid one hand into the breast of his coat, in a characteristic gesture. "But where in the name of sanity does that leave us? He wants to expose someone. And to do that, he puts on outlandish clothes and masquerades as a burglar. Is that sensible? I tell you, the man was mad! There's no other explanation."

"There are five other explanations," said Dr. Fell.

Derek Henderson slowly got up from his seat on the balustrade, but he sat down again at a savage gesture from Rolfe.

"I will not, however," pursued Dr. Fell, "waste your time with four of them. We are concerned with only one explanation: the real one."

"And you know the real one?" asked Henderson sharply.

"I think so."

"Since when?"

"Since I had the opportunity of looking at all of you," answered Dr. Fell.

He settled back massively in the wicker settee, so that its frame creaked and cracked like a ship's bulkhead in a heavy sea. His vast chin was outthrust, and he nodded absently as though to emphasize some point that was quite clear in his own mind.

"I've already had a word with the local inspector," he went on suddenly. "He will be here in a few minutes. And, at my suggestion, he will have a request for all of you. I sincerely hope nobody will refuse."

"Request?" said Henderson. "What request?"

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"It's a very hot day," said Dr. Fell, blinking towards the swimming pool. "He's going to suggest that you all go in for a swim."

Harriet uttered a kind of despairing mutter, and turned as though appealing to Lew Cutler.

"That," continued Dr. Fell, "will be the politest way of drawing attention to the murderer. In the meantime, let me call your attention to one point in the evidence which seems to have been generally overlooked. Mr. Henderson, do you know anything about heart wounds, made by a steel blade as thin as a wafer?"

"Like Hunt's wound? No. What about them?"

"There is practically no exterior bleeding," answered Dr. Fell.

"But — !" Harriet was beginning, when Cutler stopped her.

"The police surgeon, in fact, called attention to that wound which was so 'difficult to find.' The victim dies almost at once; and the edges of the wound compress. But in that case," argued Dr. Fell, "how did the late Mr. Hunt come to have so much blood on his sweater, and even splashed on his trousers?"

"Well?"

"He didn't," answered Dr. Fell simply. "Mr. Hunt's blood never got on his clothes at all."

"I can't stand this," said Harriet, jumping to her feet. "I — I'm sorry, but have you gone mad yourself? Are you telling us we didn't see him lying by that sideboard, with all that blood on him?"

"Oh, yes. You saw that."

"Let him go on," said Henderson, who was rather white round the nostrils. "Let him rave."

"It is, I admit, a fine point," said Dr. Fell. "But it answers your question, repeated to the point of nausea, as to why the eminently sensible Mr. Hunt chose to dress up in burglar's clothes and play burglar. The answer is short and simple. He didn't."

"It must be plain to everybody," Dr. Fell went on, opening his eyes wide, "that Mr. Hunt was deliberately setting a trap for someone — for the real burglar. He believed that a certain person might try to steal one or several of his pictures. He probably knew that this person had tried similar games before, in other country houses: that is, an inside job which was carefully planned to look like an outside job. So he made things easy for this thief, in order to trap him, with a police officer in the house.

"The burglar, a sad fool, fell for it. This thief, a guest in the house, waited until well past 2 o'clock in the morning. He then put on his old clothes, mask, gloves, and the rest of it. He let himself out by the back door. He went through all the motions we have erroneously been attributing to Marcus Hunt. Then the trap snapped. Just as he was rolling up the Rembrandt, he heard a noise. He swung his light round. And he saw Marcus Hunt, in pajamas and dressing gown, looking at him.

"Yes, there was a fight. Hunt flew

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at him. The thief snatched up a fruit knife and fought back. In the struggle Marcus Hunt forced his opponent's hand back. The fruit knife gashed the thief's chest, inflicting a superficial but badly bleeding gash. It sent the thief over the edge of insanity. He wrenched at Marcus Hunt's wrist, caught up the knife, and stabbed Hunt in the heart.

"Then, in a quiet house, with a little beam of light streaming out from the torch on the sideboard, the murderer sees something that will hang him. He sees the blood from his own superficial wound seeping down his clothes.

"How is he to get rid of those clothes? He cannot destroy them, or get them away from the house. Inevitably the house will be searched, and they will be found. Without the bloodstains, they would seem ordinary clothes in his wardrobe. But with the bloodstains—

"There is only one thing he can do."

Harriet Davis was standing behind the wicker settee, shading her eyes against the glare of the sun. Her hand did not tremble when she said:

"He changed clothes with my uncle."

"That's it," growled Dr. Fell. "That's the whole sad story. The murderer dressed the body in his own clothes, making a puncture with the knife in sweater, shirt, and undervest. He then slipped on Mr. Hunt's pajamas and dressing gown, which at a pinch he could always claim as his own. Hunt's wound had bled hardly at all. His dressing gown, I think, had come open in the fight, so that all the thief had to trouble him was a tiny puncture in the jacket of the pajamas.

"But, once he had done this, he had to hypnotize you all into the belief that there would have been no time for a change of clothes. He had to make it seem that the fight occurred just *then*. He had to rouse the house. So he brought down echoing thunders by pushing over a pile of silver, and slipped upstairs."

Dr. Fell paused.

"The burglar could never have been Marcus Hunt, you know," he added. "We learn that Hunt's fingerprints were all over the place. Yet the murdered man was wearing gloves."

There was a swishing of feet in the grass below the terrace, and a tread of heavy boots coming up the terrace steps. The local Inspector of police, buttoned up and steaming in his uniform, was followed by two constables.

Dr. Fell turned round a face of satisfaction.

"Ah!" he said, breathing deeply. "They've come to see about that swimming party, I imagine. It is easy to patch up a flesh wound with lint and cotton, or even a handkerchief. But such a wound will become infernally conspicuous in anyone who is forced to climb into bathing trunks."

"But it couldn't have been—" cried Harriet. Her eyes moved round. Her fingers tightened on Lew Cutler's

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arm, an instinctive gesture which he was to remember long afterwards, when he knew her even better.

"Exactly," agreed the doctor, wheezing with pleasure. "It could not have been a long, thin, gangling fellow like Mr. Henderson. It assuredly could not have been a small and slender girl like yourself.

"There is only one person who, as we know, is just about Marcus Hunt's height and build, who could have put his own clothes on Hunt without any suspicion. That is the same person who, though he managed to staunch the wound in his chest, has been constantly running his hand inside the breast of his coat to make certain the bandage is secure. Just as Mr. Rolfe is doing now."

Arthur Rolfe sat very quiet, with his right hand still in the breast of his jacket. His face had grown smeary in the hot sunlight, but the eyes behind those thin shells of glasses remained inscrutable. He spoke only once, through dry lips, after they had cautioned him.

"I should have taken the young pup's warning," he said. "After all, he told me I would take the long chance."

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